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The Complications of Philosophy: Fortune, Happiness, Evil, and Free Will in Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy

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The Complications of Philosophy:

Fortune, Happiness, Evil, and Free Will in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*

By

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For Ryan,

who asked me to explain it all to him

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Introduction

Boethius and his Consolation

The *Consolation of Philosophy* was written while its author, Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c. 475-526 C.E.), was in prison, awaiting execution. A member of the Roman aristocracy by birth, and a scholar trained in the Greek tradition, Boethius had devoted much of his life to translating and commenting on classic philosophical works, especially the logical works of Aristotle; he had also written a number of mathematical and logical textbooks, as well as a series of treatises that applied his work in logic to contemporary theological problems. However, in about 520 C.E., Boethius gave up his private life in Rome to become "Master of Offices" for the Ostragothic king, Theodoric, in Ravenna, Italy. As Master of Offices, Boethius was the intermediary between Theodoric and the rest of the government officials, a position fraught with political pitfalls. Shortly after he took office, Boethius fell into imperial disfavor—probably because he had exposed the corruption of top officials—and was sentenced to death on charges of treason and witchcraft.[1]

Torn from his family and stripped of his political power, Boethius returned to the pursuit that had characterized his earlier life: writing. The *Consolation of Philosophy* is a dialogue between a prisoner (assumed to be Boethius himself) and Lady Philosophy, the incarnation of wisdom.[2] The action begins when Philosophy descends to the prisoner's cell to console him in his misfortune, and the conversation that ensues ranges from a discussion of the prisoner's personal misfortune to philosophically complex arguments about the nature of fortune, happiness, evil, and free will. The resulting text is a sophisticated blend of poetry and prose, and a powerful exploration of major philosophical and

[1] John Marenbon, "Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2009 Edition),* edited by Edward N. Zalta, 6 May 2005, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2009/entries/boethius/>; cf., John Marenbon, *Boethius* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 9.

[2] To avoid any confusion between Boethius-the-author and Boethius-the-character, I will refer to Lady Philosophy's interlocutor as "the prisoner" and the author of the *Consolation* as "Boethius;" for the sake of brevity, I shall also refer to Lady Philosophy simply as "Philosophy."

theological problems, that has captured the attention of philosophers, scholars, theologians, and lay readers for centuries.

The genre of consolation

The *Consolation* derives its title from the literary genre of consolation, a genre whose purpose in the ancient world "was to show why a particular apparent evil (old age, exile, the loss of a beloved one, death) is not really something to fear or lament at all."[3] The literary works of which the genre was comprised were formally diverse. Consolatory works took the form of philosophical treatises which explored the conceptual structure of sorrow, they were frequently published as open letters or poems, and they were delivered as speeches. [4] However, despite their diversity, works of consolation were united by the overarching theme of grief: they sought to comfort the bereaved and provide the friends of the dead with reasons for why death ought not be feared. [5]

The *Consolation* is not a paradigmatic consolation (for reasons discussed below), but it clearly aligns itself with the genre in at least two ways. First, Boethius' *Consolation* is clearly inspired by some of the traditional reasons for consolation. Although the grief addressed in a consolation was typically occasioned by the death of a loved one, it could also stem from loss in a more general sense (e.g., the loss of one's youth or country or social status). The prisoner is not mourning the death of anyone he loves; however, he is mourning his own impending death, his forced separation from his family and friends, and the loss of his reputation, power, and personal freedom. Second, the structure of the *Consolation* reflects two of the fundamental values of the traditional consolation. Like a traditional

[3] John Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness: Interpreting Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*," in *Rationality and Happiness: From the Ancients to the Early Medievals*, edited by Jiyuan Yu and Jorge J.E. Gracia (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 175.
[4] J.H.D. Scourfield, introduction to *Consoling Heliodorus: A Commentary on Jerome, Letter 60* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 16-17.
[5] Joel C. Relihan, introduction to *The Prisoner's Philosophy: Life and Death in Boethius's* Consolation (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), xi; cf., James McEvoy, "Ultimate Goods: happiness, friendship, and bliss," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, edited by A.S. McGrade, 259 and Michael H. Means, *The Consolatio Genre in Medieval English Literature* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1972), 8.

consolation, it assumes that words and, in this case, dialogue have curative properties.[6] And the *Consolation's* movement from the prisoner's practical concerns to Philosophy's theoretical arguments mirrors the traditional consolation's effort to console by guiding the bereaved away from personal distress and toward a more objective understanding of grief.[7]

These connections between the *Consolation* and the genre of consolation help explain the *Consolation*'s title and give us some reason to categorize it as a *bona fide* consolatory work, but they are overshadowed by the fact that the *Consolation* flouts a number of genre-specific conventions: the text is not addressed to anyone in particular; the title itself is ambiguous (who, precisely, is being consoled? Philosophy or some other, unnamed person?); it is composed of both prose and poetry; and it begins *in media res*. In contrast, traditional consolations "set the stage much more clearly and unambiguously;" there is no question about who the addressee is or what the particulars of the situation are.[8] Finally, the *Consolation* neglects the central problem of most consolatory works: death. Joel C. Relihan aptly summarizes the situation:

> The word consolation cannot help but bring to a reader's mind solace in the face of death; and this solace embraces such things as assertions of the immortality of the soul, descriptions of the rewards of the blessed, and visions of eternity. None of these is to be found in the text. . . . Further, *Consolation* offers no reasons why death is not to be feared and spends most of its time taking the narrator's impending death for granted, in order to talk of other things, none of which involves a beatific vision. Certainly, the word "consolation" does not by itself a consolation make, yet there remains the interesting question: Why label a work with what seems to be a false promise?[9]

I disagree with Relihan's claim that Philosophy neglects to provide the prisoner with an account of "the rewards of the blessed" (Book IV contains a lengthy description of reward and punishment) and that her consolation lacks "visions of eternity" (Book V discusses eternity, albeit in a distinctly philosophical, rather than devotional, vein). However, Relihan is correct to point out that the topic of death qua death

[6] Cf., Scourfield, introduction to *Consoling Heliodorus*, 18.
[7] Relihan, *The Prisoner's Philosophy,* 50.
[8] Ibid., 52.
[9] Ibid., 48-49.

is not touched in the *Consolation*. Philosophy's analyses of happiness, fortune, evil, and free will are not provided as explicit reasons for the prisoner to accept his imminent death (although they might comprise an implicit reason for such acceptance); rather, they are presented without regard to the prisoner's impending death, a presentation which suggests that the prisoner's response to the fact of his death is of little consequence.

The puzzle of the Consolation

Clearly, the *Consolation* diverges from the genre of consolation in significant ways. This divergence has occasioned a series of important interpretive questions: How ought we to read a work that appears to align itself with a given literary genre and then proceeds to break the essential rules of that genre? Did Boethius attempt to write a traditional consolation and fail, did he write a nontraditional but genuine consolation, or did he purposefully create a text that parodies a traditional consolation? Put another way, Should we take the *Consolation* as a serious attempt at consolation?[10]

This last question, while potentially illuminating, is too vague; it does not tell us how we ought to assess the "seriousness" of the *Consolation*. The project is made especially difficult because the text is a blend of literature and philosophy: meditative (and philosophical) poems provide a counterpoint to long sections of densely argued prose; philosophical ideas are knit together with literary motifs; and the main characters of the work are vehicles of argument and dramatic tension. The multi-faceted nature of the *Consolation* has thus led to two divergent interpretive approaches, one literary and the other philosophical. These approaches, in turn, adopt two different sets of criteria for assessing the *Consolation*'s purpose.

Interpretations of the *Consolation* that focus on its literary elements evaluate the purpose of the *Consolation* in terms of the outcome of Philosophy's consolation of the prisoner: Does Philosophy offer

[10] These are not, of course, the only questions raised in the secondary literature on the *Consolation*. However, as will be shown, much of the contemporary scholarship can be funneled into this array of questions.

the prisoner a coherent picture of the universe? Does the prisoner acknowledge Philosophy's dramatic authority, or is he skeptical of her power? Does he accept the consolation Philosophy offers, or does he reject it? More succinctly, Does Philosophy *console* the prisoner? In general, if the prisoner bows to Philosophy's authority and accepts her consolation, then we have good reason to consider the *Consolation* to be a serious (albeit nontraditional) consolation. If, on the other hand, the prisoner rejects Philosophy's authority and her consolation, then we have cause to wonder if Boethius really intended the *Consolation* seriously.

Conversely, scholars who are more interested in Philosophy's arguments about fortune, happiness, evil, and free will than they are in the text's literary devices evaluate the purpose of the *Consolation* in philosophic terms. The adherents of this approach want to know (a) if Philosophy's major arguments, considered individually, are valid and (b) if they are consistent with one another. If Philosophy's arguments are valid and consistent, then we have good reason to think that Boethius was seriously advancing those arguments and that the *Consolation* ought to be taken as a serious (albeit nontraditional) consolation. If Philosophy's arguments fail the twin tests of validity and consistency, then we must concede that either Boethius's *Consolation* was an honest but unsuccessful attempt at consolation, or we must explore other reasons for Philosophy's failure—perhaps Boethius purposefully allowed Philosophy to present flawed arguments in order to make a point about philosophy or the goals of consolatory literature.

These two interpretive approaches to the *Consolation* are not equally represented in the secondary literature. Criticism (both contemporary and classic) overwhelming takes the literary approach; while in contemporary literature, only one scholar (John Marenbon) advances a robustly philosophical reading of the text. According to the classic (literary) interpretation of the text, the *Consolation* ought to be taken seriously, as an honest (if unorthodox) attempt at consolation. Proponents of the traditional reading include John Haldane, Brian Harding, Donald F. Duclow, and

Thomas Curley, all of whom claim that Philosophy consoles Boethius, whether she does so by showing him how to lead a contemplative life (Haldane,[11] Duclow,[12] and Harding[13]) or by showing him the inner workings of the cosmos (Curley[14]). This reading of the *Consolation* is attractive because it is relatively straightforward; it assumes that when Boethius promises us a *Consolation*, we can expect a consolation. Unfortunately, the simplicity of this interpretation also leaves it vulnerable to more sophisticated philosophical and literary counterarguments.

In *The Prisoner's Philosophy*, Joel C. Relihan advances a literary reading of the *Consolation* which contests the traditional interpretation. He argues that the prisoner ultimately rejects Philosophy's consolation and that, consequently, the *Consolation* ought to be read as a parody of a consolation, rather than a genuine attempt to console. According to Relihan, the unresolved tension between Philosophy and the prisoner, the prisoner's repeated interruptions of Philosophy, Philosophy's forced digressions, and Philosophy's inability to meet her consolatory goals mark the text as an example of Menippean satire. An ancient literary genre, comprised of a wide variety of works, Menippean satire is characterized by its representation of the universe as essentially disordered and incoherent, and by its mockery of attempts to demystify the world.[15] For Relihan, Philosophy's unsuccessful attempt to offer the prisoner a unified theory of everything results in a fundamental disjointedness that leads the prisoner (and the reader) to reject the authority of Philosophy and reason.[16]

Relihan's ironic interpretation of the *Consolation* improves upon the traditional reading because it makes sense of the literary puzzles scattered throughout the text: it explains why it looks as if the

[11] John Haldane, "*De Consolatione Philosophiae*," in *Philosophy, Religion, and the Spiritual Life*," edited by Michael McGhee, 31-45. Cited in John Fortin, "The Nature of Consolation in *The Consolation of Philosophy*," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2004): 294.
[12] Donald F. Duclow, "Perspective and Therapy in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy,*" *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 4, no. 3 (1979): 335.
[13] Brian Harding, "Metaphysical Speculation and Its Applicability to a Mode of Living: The Case of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*," *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter* 9 (2004): 82.
[14] Thomas F. Curley III, "How to Read the *Consolation of Philosophy*," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 14 (1986): 220. Cited in Fortin, "The Nature of Consolation," 294.
[15] Relihan, *The Prisoner's Philosophy*, 2.
[16] Ibid., 4.

central problems of the text (especially those involving free will and the prisoner's identity) are never fully resolved; it makes sense of the prisoner's apparent unwillingness to accept Philosophy's arguments; and it places the *Consolation* in a distinct literary genre, as opposed to classifying it in negative terms as a "nontraditional" consolation.

However, Relihan's interpretation, like the traditional readings, is incomplete because it does not carefully examine the philosophical elements of the text. A strictly literary approach to the *Consolation* can be illuminating, but if we focus only on the literary elements of the text, we will only be able to conclude that, insofar as its literary elements are concerned, the *Consolation* is ironic or serious. However, we don't want to say just that the *Consolation*, literarily speaking, is (non)serious; we want to say that the *Consolation* as a whole is either serious or not. And in order to make this kind of claim, we must consider its philosophical content as well as its literary form.

John Marenbon's philosophical interpretation of the text is a useful amendment to Relihan's reading. Like Relihan, he argues that the *Consolation* is ironic; unlike Relihan, he makes his case on philosophical grounds. The *Consolation* must be ironic, Marenbon argues, because Philosophy's arguments (especially her arguments about happiness and free will) are inconsistent: "if Boethius the author fully endorses Philosophy's arguments and positions, then he is guilty of looseness, incoherence, and confusion."[17] A more charitable reading of the text is that Boethius purposefully casts Philosophy as inconsistent and unpersuasive in order to question the authority and usefulness of philosophy as a discipline.[18] Though Marenbon agrees with Relihan's classification of the text as Menippean satire, he does not think that Boethius intends to suggest that we reject the authority of philosophy altogether; rather, the *Consolation*'s treatment of philosophy is meant to encourage us to be carefully skeptical of the power of reason.[19]

[17] Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness," 190.
[18] Ibid., 175-197 (at 192).
[19] Marenbon, *Boethius*, 162.

Marenbon and Relihan make a formidable case for an ironic *Consolation*. Taken together, their interpretations make sense of important philosophical and literary anomalies in the text. Their interpretations are also attractive because they salvage Boethius's reputation as an author and philosopher. Without the help of an ironic interpretation, it looks as if Boethius will be doomed to charges of philosophical and literary incompetency. His arguments may have been intended seriously, but they are deeply flawed, and he was clearly confused about whether Philosophy or the prisoner was supposed to have the final word in the text. The ironic reading allows us to interpret the *Consolation* as a coherent piece of literature and philosophy without ignoring its apparent literary and philosophical flaws; better, it reinterprets those "flaws" as the defining elements of the text, as precisely those elements which render the text coherent. This interpretive move simultaneously saves Boethius from scholarly disgrace and brings his text in line with modern sensibilities—there is after all something distinctly vogue about a satirical, self-referring *Consolation*.

Against an ironic consolation

Despite the obvious attractions of the interpretation, there are two reasons we should be suspicious of an ironic (i.e., Menippean) *Consolation*. First, Menippean satire is extraordinarily hard to define as a genre (though Relihan attempts to do so). There are only a few extant examples of the genre, and there is enough variation among those examples that Menippean satire verges on being a "catch-all" category rather than a distinct genre. Thus, to call the *Consolation* "Menippean" is merely to place it among a nebulous set of other, possibly similar, but ultimately different, literary works—works whose *only* unifying factor is a fundamental lack of unity.[20]

Second, the desire to salvage Boethius's reputation and render the *Consolation* palatable to modern taste, while admirable, smacks of anachronism. After all, perhaps Boethius intended the

[20] Cf., Danuta Shanzer, "Interpreting the *Consolation*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius*, edited by John Marenbon (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 234-236.

Consolation to be taken seriously but constructed flawed arguments or stumbled into literary incoherency on accident; such a case, although an unhappy one, would not be unique to Boethius—other philosophers have walked that road before him. Maybe Relihan and Marenbon, together with the various advocates of the traditional reading, are refusing to acknowledge the most elegant solution to the puzzle of the *Consolation*: that Boethius was just wrong.

This, of course, is not the most attractive solution to the problem at hand. It would be nice if we could read Boethius charitably without consigning him to the dustbin of failed philosophical and literary works. Thankfully, another possibility presents itself. A third counter-argument to the ironic interpretation is that the reading hinges on *apparent* philosophical and literary anomalies in the *Consolation*. If the problems of literary tension and philosophical inconsistencies described by Relihan and Marenbon can be resolved, then the ironic interpretation has lost its foundation.

Happiness as the key to a non-ironic Consolation

In what follows, I argue, contra Marenbon and Relihan, that the *Consolation* is not ironic. Boethius did not write the *Consolation* to satirize the discipline of philosophy, but to present a philosophical theory which he believed ought to be taken seriously. In particular, I argue that Boethius, through the dialogue between Philosophy and the prisoner, develops a theory of happiness, a theory that is supposed to help the prisoner (and the audience) resolve the questions about fortune, divine providence, and free will raised at the beginning of the text.

The main work of this thesis is to trace and analyze the evolution of the *Consolation*'s theory of happiness. In Chapter 1, I demonstrate that Philosophy's primary goal in the *Consolation* is to show the prisoner what happiness is and make him truly happy. In Chapters 2 and 3, I argue that Philosophy achieves this goal by leading the prisoner through a series of consistent (and increasingly rigorous) philosophical arguments which prove that rationality is the necessary and sufficient condition for

happiness and which teach the prisoner how to think rationally. Finally, in Chapters 4 and 5, I argue (once more contra Relihan) that Philosophy's discussion of free will is not a digression and that the prisoner's interruptions of Philosophy are not proof that he rejects her consolation; instead, these literary tensions are indications that Philosophy has consoled the prisoner, that the prisoner has *accepted* her consolation. By the end of the *Consolation*, the prisoner is able to engage in philosophical argument. He interrupts Philosophy, redirects their conversation, and challenges her to provide him with satisfying answers to the questions he originally asked. The prisoner's renewed control of himself and the conversation—his rationality—proves that Philosophy has accomplished her goal: the prisoner is truly happy.

I submit that this happiness-based interpretation of the text provides us with two reasons to take the *Consolation* seriously (i.e., to interpret it non-ironically). First, the fact that Philosophy achieves her consolatory goals—the fact that she does indeed make the prisoner happy—and the fact that the prisoner accepts Philosophy's consolation disproves Relihan's argument that Philosophy fails to console the prisoner. Thus, we have no literary support for an ironic reading of the *Consolation*. Second, the fact that Philosophy's account of happiness as rationality is consistent and the fact that, with it, we are able to piece together a consistent reading of her arguments about fortune, providence, and free will as consistent and valid counters Marenbon's claim that Philosophy's arguments are inconsistent and invalid. There are, therefore, no philosophical grounds for interpreting the *Consolation* as ironic. Instead, we are confronted with a *Consolation* that is philosophically consistent and literarily cohesive, one which makes a solid case for a definition of happiness as rationality and which ultimately convinces the prisoner (if not the audience) of the viability of that definition.

My reading of the *Consolation* places me on the side of a traditional interpretation; like the proponents of the traditional interpretation, I argue that the *Consolation* ought to be taken as a serious consolation. However, my reading of the *Consolation* is distinct from traditional interpretations for two

reasons. First, I assess and respond to the ironic reading presented by Marenbon and Relihan, a reading which poses serious problems for a traditional interpretation of the text. Second, I consider both the literary and philosophical components of the text. I evaluate the *Consolation* in terms of whether Philosophy achieves her consolatory goals (a literary concern) and in terms of the consistency and validity of her arguments (a philosophical concern), and I conclude that there are philosophical *and* literary grounds for a reading of the text as non-ironic. It is important to note, however, that because this thesis is primarily a philosophical investigation, I do not pretend to give the philosophical and literary elements of the *Consolation* equal "air time." The bulk of the thesis (Chapters 2, 3, and 5) deals with proving the consistency and validity of the *Consolation*'s arguments. My hope is that this new approach—with its emphasis on philosophy and its response to contemporary scholarship—will provide a defense of a non-ironic *Consolation* that is more comprehensive and, hence, stronger than its traditional counterparts.

1. Consolatory Goals

Introduction

The place to begin a comprehensive interpretation of the *Consolation* is at the intersection of the literary and philosophical approaches to the text, with the identification of Philosophy's consolatory goals: What does Philosophy promise the prisoner she will accomplish through her consolation? The answer to this question is important for a literary interpretation of the text because, in order to determine whether or not Philosophy keeps her consolatory promises (and Relihan says she does not), we need to know what kind of consolation Philosophy has committed herself to. Likewise, in order to assess the philosophical consistency of Philosophy's arguments throughout the *Consolation*, we have to understand her overarching argument.

As established in the introduction, the *Consolation* is not a traditional consolation. In contrast to other consolatory texts, and despite the prisoner's situation, the *Consolation* does not directly discuss death. But this does not mean that the text has no consolatory elements whatsoever (in fact we have already seen that the *Consolation* is related to the genre of consolation in several important ways); what it does mean is that we will have to look beyond the conventions of genre for the goal of this particular consolatory text—we will have to allow Philosophy herself to set the parameters of her consolation. In this chapter, I take two approaches to examining Philosophy's goals: in the first section, I explore Philosophy's explicit promises to the prisoner and the standard interpretations of those promises; in the second half of the chapter, I present my interpretation of those promises, arguing that Philosophy's implicit consolatory goal is to make the prisoner truly happy.

Philosophy's explicit consolatory promise

Philosophy makes her first appearance in the *Consolation* against the backdrop of the prisoner's

professional and personal disaster. In the opening poem of the text, the prisoner, aided by the Muses of poetry, laments his fate at the hands of "faithless Fortune:" once "prosperous and happy," he is now "a grieving old man;" he earnestly desires death—but even death withholds herself from him.[21] Into this dismal scene sweeps Philosophy. She immediately disperses the Muses of poetry, chastising them for their distracting sympathy, and she announces that her own Muses will effect the prisoner's "convalescence and cure."[22] This announcement introduces (and is characteristic of) Philosophy's approach to the prisoner's situation throughout the rest of the text. Philosophy assumes that the prisoner suffers, not from external woes, but from a problem that is distinctly internal; she treats him like a man who is ill and needs to be healed, not like a man who has been imprisoned and seeks freedom.

Accordingly, instead of promising to reinstate the prisoner's good fortune, Philosophy promises to cure him of his illness. At I.6.18-19, Philosophy summarizes what she sees as the prisoner's problems:

> Consider: Since you are dazed by self-forgetfulness, you lamented that you were an exile and that you were deprived of goods rightfully yours; further, since you do not know what is the goal of things, you think that wicked and worthless men are truly powerful and prosperous; still further, since you have forgotten what are the rudders by which the world is governed, you reckon that the vicissitudes of individual fortunes bob up and down without a helmsman. All these are huge causes that lead not only to disease, but to death as well.

Philosophy diagnoses the prisoner with self-forgetfulness, ignorance of the world's final cause, and ignorance of how the world is governed (whether by chance or providence).[23] Implicit in this summary is the claim that if the prisoner realizes who he is, and if he can identify the final cause of the world and the method by which it is governed, then he will be cured of his illness. Thus, according to this passage, Philosophy's broad goal of curing the prisoner can be more precisely described as an effort to help the

[21] Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, translated by Joel C. Relihan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), I.*1*.17, 7-8; 14-16. (Italicized numbers refer to metered sections, while their un-italicized counterparts refer to prose sections.)
[22] Ibid., I.1.11.
[23] For a similar (traditional) breakdown of the diagnosis, see also Duclow, "Perspective and Therapy," 336 and Pierre Courcelle, *La Consolation dans la tradition litteraire (*Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1967), 27.

prisoner discover himself and find answers to the problems he faces.

Philosophy's trinity of diagnoses has been variously re-constructed to privilege first one and then another component of the prisoner's malaise. John Magee emphasizes the problems of liberty that arise through the discussion of the world's "rudders," suggesting that Philosophy's primary goal is to explain the problem of free-will to the prisoner.[24] Relihan includes only Philosophy's promise to help the prisoner remember his identity among what he claims are the four main promises of the *Consolation*.[25] And Marenbon describes the "dual aim" of the *Consolation* as that of (a) providing personal consolation (i.e., making the prisoner happy) and (b) explaining the final cause of things.[26] These divergent methods of parsing Philosophy's goals are not wrong, but they are incomplete, insofar as none of them accounts for *all* of the problems Philosophy raises at the end of Book I.

Philosophy's implicit consolatory goal

A better way of categorizing the components of Philosophy's diagnosis is to consider them in light of an overarching problem that Philosophy identifies in the incipient moments of the text: the prisoner's lack of rationality. Philosophy's first words condemn the Muses of poetry for distracting the prisoner from rational discourse. These "stage whores," she says, "choke out the rich fields of reason's fruits; theirs are the barren brambles of the passions; they acclimatize the mortal mind to disease, and do not liberate it."[27] In her opening meter (Meter 2), Philosophy similarly addresses the degeneration of the prisoner's rationality, bemoaning his dullness of mind, and his inability to formulate philosophical questions.[28] In Prose 2, she argues that the prisoner has thrown away the "weapons" of philosophy and

[24] John Magee, "Boethius' *Consolatio* and the Theme of Roman Liberty," *Phoenix* 59, nos. 3/4 (2005): 348-364.
[25] Relihan, *The Prisoner's Philosophy,* 4-5. The other three promises Relihan attributes to Philosophy are a treatment of death, a return of Boethius to his true homeland, and harsher remedies.
[26] Marenbon, *Boethius*, 100-102.
[27] Boethius, *Consolation,* I.1.9.
[28] Ibid., I.2.2, 24, 6, and 22.

now suffers from "incomprehension."[29] Most notably, the prisoner's ignorance is also the common root of the three elements of Philosophy's diagnosis of his illness at the end of Book I: he *doesn't understand* himself, the final cause of the world, or the workings of providence/fate. In order to discover the answers to the questions that befuddle him, the prisoner must reclaim his rationality; he must beat back the "full-scale rebellion of passions" by which he has been "besieged" and regain his self-control.[30]

It is relatively easy to see how rationality might aid the prisoner in answering the questions Philosophy has identified; it is more difficult to see how pure rationality can satisfactorily address the prisoner's complaints at the beginning of the text. The losses the prisoner has suffered are concrete and material (his physical freedom and wealth), and those losses have made him miserable. We might protest, on the prisoner's behalf, that rationality alone cannot possibly be the cure for his unhappiness. Surely Philosophy owes the prisoner a better solution than that he can become happy again merely by thinking about the right sorts of things in the right way. In the books that follow, however, Philosophy argues precisely this. Rationality, she claims, is the necessary and sufficient condition for true happiness.[31] Her first explicit reference to the relationship between rationality and happiness occurs in Book II, where Philosophy cites the reclamation of self as the well-spring of the prisoner's happiness:

> But to *you* I will reveal in brief what the highest happiness hinges on. Is there anything more valuable to you than yourself? You will say, Nothing. Therefore, if you have mastery over yourself, you will possess a thing that you yourself would never want to lose and that Fortune could not ever take away from you.[32]

As the text unfolds, Philosophy more or less gently directs the prisoner down this interior, rationality-based path to happiness, a path that leads him away from the world and into the rich meditations of the mind. Philosophy begins with a series of "practical" arguments in Book II about concerns close to home (i.e., the prisoner's loss of fortune), progresses to more theoretical grounds with

[29] Ibid., I.2.3-4.
[30] Ibid., I.5.11. Cf., Harding, "Metaphysical Speculation," 91: "This [the prisoner's] confusion is rooted in the passions and only by ascending from passion to reason can Boethius [the prisoner] recognize the true good."
[31] Cf., Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness," 175.
[32] Boethius, *Consolation*, II.5.23.

a review of human desires in general in the first half of Book III, and nearly leaves the world behind altogether in rest of Book III and Books IV-V with her conceptually difficult discussions of happiness, fate, and providence.[33] Philosophy's mandate that the prisoner distance himself from the vagaries of the world comes with the challenge to possess himself of a more rigorous rationality**.** He must critically assess what he has hitherto called happiness and pursue its theoretical implications. This definition of happiness as rationality is admittedly cold, and almost impossibly abstract, but it does not ignore the prisoner's concerns. The prisoner desires happiness, and Philosophy offers him a way to fulfill that desire.

I said at the beginning of this chapter that *an* understanding of Philosophy's consolatory goal will shape philosophical and literary interpretations of the *Consolation* in important ways. I would now add that it is equally important to recognize that Philosophy's *specific* goal is to make the prisoner happy. Philosophy's promise of happiness, once accorded its proper place as the central goal of the *Consolation,* becomes the metric by which we can assess the philosophical consistency and literary coherency of the text as a whole. If the *Consolation* is truly non-ironic, then Philosophy's account of happiness will be consistent, and she will make the prisoner truly happy. In the following chapters, I explore the development of Philosophy's account of happiness, defending its consistency and demonstrating that, ultimately, she accomplishes her goal.

[33] John Magee, "The Good and morality: *Consolatio* 2-4," in *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius*, edited by John Marenbon (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 183.

2. True Happiness and Fortune

The problem of happiness

Philosophy makes her case for rationality as a necessary and sufficient condition for true happiness in Books II and III of the *Consolation*. I have divided her argument into three stages: (1) the negative definition of true happiness; (2) the negative how-to of happiness; and (3) the positive definition and how-to of happiness. In the first stage (chiefly Book II), Philosophy argues that the prisoner has no reason to mourn the loss of his good fortune because good fortune lacks the essential characteristics of true happiness and is, therefore, not sufficient for true happiness. In the second stage (primarily sections 1-8 of Book III), Philosophy outlines a series of methods by which true happiness *cannot* be obtained, arguing that people pursue "false goods" because they mistakenly believe them to be necessary for happiness. Finally (in III.9*ff*), Philosophy argues for a *positive* definition of true happiness (true happiness is God, the Good, and the One), a definition which, when taken together with the negative how-to, leaves the prisoner only one route to true happiness: rationality. Thus, Philosophy argues that the prisoner will be truly happy *iff* he is rational.

Philosophy's account of true happiness is the linchpin of the *Consolation*, but Marenbon argues that her account is problematic. It is difficult to determine what, precisely, Philosophy claims about the relationship between fortune and happiness. Her account of rationality as the necessary and sufficient condition for happiness implies that good fortune is neither necessary nor sufficient for happiness. One need not have good fortune in order to be happy, nor does having good fortune guarantee that one will be happy; what happiness does require is rationality, and if one is rational, then one will of course be happy. Unfortunately for this straightforward account of happiness, there are also sections of text which indicate that Philosophy actually considers good fortune to be necessary for true happiness. Philosophy thus appears to provide the prisoner with two accounts of true happiness that are

inconsistent with one another, arguing both that the prisoner can be happy without the gifts of fortune and that he needs them in order to be happy. According to Marenbon, this inconsistency derails Philosophy's attempt to provide the prisoner with a definition of true happiness and thus lends credibility to an ironic interpretation of the *Consolation*.

In this chapter and the following one, I defend Philosophy's account of true happiness from Marenbon's charge of inconsistency. I argue that despite the complexities and apparent incongruities of the text, Philosophy advances a single, consistent account of true happiness, of which rationality (and not fortune) is the necessary and sufficient condition. This chapter begins with a brief examination of Marenbon's interpretation of the *Consolation*. I then turn to an analysis of the overarching structure of Philosophy's main argument, claiming that it is consistent. Finally, I argue that what Marenbon identifies as Philosophy's second account of true happiness is actually the negative component of her primary account of true happiness. It is a dialectical tool designed to assuage Boethius's concerns about the gifts of fortune before presenting him with a new definition of true happiness.

Marenbon's charge of inconsistency (A)

Marenbon argues that Philosophy advances both a "complex" and a "monolithic" account of true happiness. Philosophy's defense of the monolithic account of happiness takes place primarily in Book III. She begins by arguing that the human *telos* is true happiness and that true happiness is the highest Good.[34] She further argues that God, in virtue of his character, must be identified with the highest Good.[35] And she concludes that since God and happiness are both the highest Good, "God is happiness itself."[36] Thus, according to the monolithic account, true happiness resides in a place (or, more aptly, a being) untouchable by the vagaries of fortune.

[34] Boethius, *Consolation,* III.2.2-3.
[35] Ibid., III.10.7-10.
[36] Ibid., III.10.17.

The gifts of fortune are neither necessary nor sufficient for this sort of (monolithic) happiness. Philosophy claims that mortals deceive themselves if they think that the gifts of fortune alone will make them happy or if they think that they need the gifts of fortune in order to be happy. Things such as riches, honor, kingdoms, glory, and physical pleasure, she says, "seem to give mortals images of the true good, perhaps, or some imperfect goods, but the true and perfect good they cannot bestow."[37] Since the gifts of fortune are not necessary or sufficient for true happiness, the prisoner, according to the monolithic account, has no reason to mourn his misfortune.[38] He has lost nothing of any real or lasting value.

Contrast this radical definition of true happiness with what Marenbon calls Philosophy's complex account. This nuanced approach to happiness begins in Book II, with Philosophy's discussion of fortune, and continues in Book IV. Although Philosophy encourages the prisoner to abandon his foolish dependence on good fortune in Book II—a step towards the total self-sufficiency advocated in the monolithic view—she does not make the stronger claim that *none* of the gifts of fortune are necessary for true happiness. In fact, she reminds the prisoner that he still possesses a number of valuable gifts of fortune. His father-in-law, wife, and sons are all still alive, and he still has friends.[39] Philosophy appears to suggest that since the prisoner is still in possession of some gifts of fortune, he has no right to be entirely miserable; he might, in fact, have good reason to be happy. The argument that the prisoner has good reason to be happy just because he still possesses some of the gifts of fortune makes hash of Philosophy's stern mandates against relying on fortune for happiness. Contra the monolithic account, her concessions here imply that the prisoner has lost (but also still possesses) something of value after all.[40] There are cases in which good fortune is necessary for happiness.

Marenbon argues that the fact that Philosophy develops two inconsistent accounts of happiness

[37] Ibid., III.9.30.
[38] Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness," 184.
[39] Boethius, *Consolation,* II.8.7.
[40] Marenbon, *Boethius*, 103.

undermines her authority as a reliable guide to true happiness.[41] Even if it turns out that she ultimately favors the monolithic account rather than the complex account (as Marenbon claims she does), the prisoner can have no incentive to trust Philosophy. Why should he prefer the monolithic account when Philosophy has also presented him with a second, conflicting, and in some ways more intuitive account of true happiness?[42]

Establishing the monolithic account

Marenbon's argument looks formidable, but when one considers the overarching structure of Philosophy's arguments, a complex account of happiness never emerges. What does emerge is a well-developed and consistent account of true happiness that spans both Books II and III. The account begins with a discussion of why the gifts of fortune are not sufficient for happiness in Book II, explores why false goods are not necessary for happiness in III.1-9, and concludes with a definition of true happiness as rationality in III.9-12. Though Marenbon claims that Philosophy also develops the complex account of happiness through her discussion of the gifts of fortune, this is not the case. The discussion of fortune that comprises the first stage of Philosophy's argument helps to establish the monolithic (and not the complex) account of true happiness.

As Book II unfolds, Philosophy considers the gifts of fortune from three different angles. She argues that the gifts of fortune are not sufficient for true happiness because (a) they are transient, (b) they cannot belong to us, and (c) they are not intrinsically good. This stage of Philosophy's argument comprises her negative account of true happiness. It turns out that what good fortune lacks is precisely what true happiness as rationality has.

Philosophy's first charge against the gifts of fortune, the claim that their transience renders them insufficient for happiness, is developed in the first four sections of Book II. Philosophy argues that

[41] Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness," 176.
[42] Ibid., 189.

fortune can never result in true happiness simply because the nature of fortune is completely antithetical to the nature of true happiness:

> Consider this so that you may realize that true happiness cannot consist of these Fortune-born things. If happiness is the highest good of a nature that lives in accordance with reason; and if the highest good is that which cannot be stolen away in any way at all, given that only that thing is most excellent that cannot be taken away; therefore, it is obvious that the instability of Fortune cannot aim at the acquisition of true happiness.[43]

True happiness, she claims, is the highest excellence, and the highest excellence cannot be taken away. The gifts of fortune, on the other hand, *can* be taken away; they lack an essential component of true happiness, and thus, the person who relies solely upon them for true happiness will be disappointed.

This discussion of the instability (and therefore insufficiency) of the gifts of fortune in Book II blossoms into a positive account of true happiness in III.10. Philosophy has already claimed in passing that one of the characteristics of true happiness is that it is lasting, but it is not until III.10 that she advances a more sustained argument to support that claim. In III.10, she argues that true happiness is identical with God and the Good. She claims that because an imperfect good exists (i.e., since there are things in this world that we consider capable of providing at least a façade of happiness), there must also exist "a steadfast and perfect good."[44] Further, because nothing can be imagined that is better than God, and because God is omnipotent, God must himself be the perfect Good.[45] Finally, since true happiness and the Good are identical (as discussed above), "true happiness is located in this highest God."[46] With this argument, Philosophy moves beyond discussing the nature of true happiness in negative terms (i.e., explaining that it is not identical with the gifts of fortune) to a more concrete definition. She argues that the stability which the gifts of fortune lack is a defining characteristic of the ideas of which true happiness is comprised: the Good that must exist is "steadfast," and God is eternal.

[43] Boethius, *Consolation,* II.4.25.
[44] Ibid., III.10.6.
[45] Ibid., III.10.7-10.
[46] Ibid., III.10.10.

Philosophy's second charge against the gifts of fortune is that they cannot belong to us and are, therefore, insufficient for happiness: "[W]hat is there in them [the gifts of fortune] that could ever truly belong to you mortals?" she asks the prisoner.[47] She attributes our inability to hold onto the gifts of fortune to (a) their externality and (b) the fact that we can never possess *all* of a particular gift but only part of it. Thus, money can never truly belong to us because it is more valuable when it is given away than when it is hoarded (i.e., it is valuable only when we *don't* possess it); the "brilliance of jewels" belongs to the jewels themselves, not to their observers; and nature operates independently of our individual wills.[48] She argues that since the prisoner is a human being and, therefore, rational, he does not need to look outside himself for fulfillment or happiness.[49] In fact, his reliance upon the external gifts of fortune actually devalues his nature as a rational human being.[50] What the prisoner needs—the thing that can never be taken away from him—is something that is internal and indivisible.

Like Philosophy's claims about the transient nature of the gifts of fortune, her discussion of their externality helps to establish a negative definition of true happiness. By the end of Book II, we know both that true happiness *cannot* be transient and that it is *not* found in things which are divisible or external to the rational human being. In III.5, Philosophy develops the latter claim in positive terms. She argues that one of the characteristics of true happiness is that it, unlike the external gifts of fortune, is self-sufficient:

> Therefore, it is human perversity that has divided this thing [true happiness] up, which is one and simple by nature; and while this perversity strives to secure a part of a thing which has no parts, it neither acquires this portion, that is a nonentity, nor the whole itself, which it tries very ineffectually to win.[51]

Because true happiness is "one and simple by nature" and "has no parts," we will not be able to obtain it

[47] Ibid., II.5.2.
[48] Ibid., II.5.1-16.
[49] Ibid., II.5.22-27.
[50] Ibid., II.5.28-31.
[51] Ibid., III.9.16.

by cobbling together bits and pieces of an inadequate fortune.[52] And as I will discuss in Chapter 3, true happiness, because it is rationality, is internal rather than external.

Philosophy's third charge against the gifts of fortune is that they are intrinsically worthless: "[W]hat is there in them," she asks, "that. . .would not become worthless upon close inspection and careful consideration?"[53] She presents two arguments for this position. First, she points out that the gifts of fortune can be used for good or ill, depending on the character of the person who possesses them. For example, good people will use their honor and power to benefit society, while evil people will use their positions to wreak havoc on others. Thus, honor and power have value only insofar as they are used wisely by people of virtue.[54] Second, Philosophy argues that because "it is not the habit of opposites to join themselves together," things intrinsically good would never "become the possessions of those who are most despicable."[55] However, it is clearly the case that the gifts of fortune do in fact attach themselves to wicked and despicable people: greedy people sometimes possess wealth, people lacking self-control sometimes abuse the power given them, and unrighteous people sometimes receive positions of honor.[56] "It's perfectly clear," Philosophy concludes, "that there is present in Fortune nothing worth pursuing, *nothing that has a goodness that belongs to its own nature.*"[57]

This conclusion dovetails neatly with Philosophy's later argument that true happiness is the highest good. If it is the case that the gifts of fortune are not intrinsically good, then, we want to ask, what is? Philosophy's response to this potential question is to argue that true happiness is itself the Good. All human beings, she says, "strive to reach only one single goal: true happiness. And that is *the* good thing. . . . It is in fact the highest of all good things and it contains all good things within itself."[58]

Each of the primary arguments in Book II about the insufficiency of the gifts of fortune for true

[52] Ibid., III.9.22.
[53] Ibid., II.5.2-3.
[54] Ibid., II.6.1-3.
[55] Ibid., II.6.13.
[56] Ibid., II.6.18-20.
[57] Ibid., II.6.20 (emphasis mine).
[58] Ibid., III.2.2-3.

happiness illuminate an important characteristic of the nature of true (monolithic) happiness. The gifts of fortune are transient, but true happiness is steadfast. The gifts of fortune can never truly belong to us because they are external to us and divisible; true happiness, on the other hand, is self-sufficient/indivisible and can only be obtained through the use of reason. Finally, the gifts of fortune are intrinsically valueless (i.e., they are not intrinsically good), while true happiness is itself the highest Good. The definition of true happiness that emerges from this (positive and negative) characterization is what Marenbon calls the monolithic account of happiness: true happiness is steadfast, self-sufficient, and intrinsically good; true happiness is God, the Good, and the One.

Philosophy's medicinal approach to the monolithic account

Since the main arguments in Book II and III work together to establish a single, consistent account of true happiness as monolithic, it seems unlikely that Philosophy would sabotage her work by introducing a competing view of happiness. But according to Marenbon, Philosophy advances a complex account of happiness in addition to her monolithic account. He argues that she claims both that fortune is a necessary condition of true happiness and that true happiness is independent of the gifts of fortune (i.e., that the gifts of fortune are not necessary for happiness). However, although Philosophy does sometimes appear to attribute value to the gifts of fortune, the instances in which she does so do not comprise a distinct account of true happiness. Instead, they are an important component of Philosophy's method of establishing the monolithic account.

Philosophy does not begin Book II by providing Boethius with a precise definition of true happiness. Boethius has spent much of Book I complaining about the things he has lost and the unfairness of his current situation. He is worried, upset, and clearly unready to remodel his conceptions of the universe. He does not want to know how to become *truly* happy; he wants to know why his life has been destroyed, and he wants his former happiness back. Accordingly, although Philosophy might

prefer to plunge directly into her account of true happiness (an account that she believes will be the prisoner's ultimate cure), she spends Book II discussing the gifts of fortune. She takes time to address the prisoner's concerns and to wean him from his dependence on fortune-born happiness before she attempts to provide him with a concrete definition of true happiness. Philosophy compares this gradated approach to that of a doctor prescribing a course of medicine to a patient. The patient, she says, must begin with gentle remedies before moving on to "more caustic ones;"[59] he must "take in and taste something mild and agreeable" and "this will prepare the way for the stronger potions after it has been conveyed to [his] inner depths."[60]

Once we understand that Philosophy is committed to a gradated consolation, her apparent inconsistencies can be resolved. When Philosophy appears to suggest in Book II that the gifts of fortune are necessary for the prisoner's happiness, she is acknowledging that the gifts of fortune are necessary for happiness according to the prisoner's *current* and erroneous worldview. Philosophy begins her enumeration of the supposed goods that the prisoner still has left to him by saying, "If it is this empty name of Fortune-born happiness that excites you so, you may now go over with me just how multiform and magnificent is your abundance still."[61] Philosophy's claim is only that, according to his faulty and fortune-dependent conception of happiness, the prisoner has not lost everything.

Furthermore, even if Philosophy claimed here that the gifts of fortune were necessary for *true* happiness (as she conceptualizes it), she would not be contradicting herself. Remember that the purpose of Book II is to prove that the gifts of fortune are not *sufficient* for happiness. She has said nothing, up to this point, about whether or not the gifts of fortune are *necessary* for true happiness. This is a problem that she reserves for the next stage of the argument.

Marenbon rejects this "medicinal approach" as a viable explanation for Philosophy's treatment

[59] Ibid., II.5.1.
[60] Ibid., II.1.7-8.
[61] Ibid., II.4.3-4.

of happiness in Book II. He argues that if it is the case that Philosophy administers first gentle and then stronger remedies, then Book III ought to begin with a markedly different approach than that advanced in Book II. But he says, "the argument in Book III up to the end of prose 8 develops a line of thinking which bears out and extends the approach of Book II."[62]

Marenbon's objection depends on a faulty characterization of the medicinal approach. It is false to assume that Philosophy's emphasis on a progression from gentle to stronger remedies necessitates that Book III begin with "a different outlook" than that developed in Book II. If she is still trying to cure the same illness, then it makes sense that her stronger remedies will be an extension of the gentler ones. What the method does demand, however, is that Philosophy's arguments grow continually stronger or, to put it in her own terms, harsher. Over the course of the text, her arguments should begin to focus less on the prisoner's concerns and be more directly applicable to her own agenda.

There are two examples of this intensification of focus at the beginning of Book III. First, there is a semantic shift. In Book II, Philosophy discusses gifts of fortune; in Book III, she exchanges the term "gifts of fortune" for the term "false goods." This exchange marks an important development in Philosophy's arguments. Instead of talking about the problems surrounding the relationship between fortune and happiness, she is now talking about false happiness. And though she is still only referring to happiness in negative terms (i.e., addressing what happiness is *not* instead of defining *true* happiness), her shift in terminology has brought her closer to her ultimate goal: a definition of true happiness.

Second, as I will argue in the next chapter, Philosophy devotes the first half of Book III to proving that the gifts of fortune (reincarnated as the false goods) are not necessary for true happiness. I submit that this attack on the necessity of the gifts of fortune also represents a strengthening of Philosophy's argument. Philosophy begins by telling the prisoner (in Book II) that good fortune is not the *only* thing required for happiness, but she leaves open the possibility that it might be necessary for happiness. In

[62] Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness," 180.

fact, as Marenbon points out, it looks as if she allows the prisoner to believe that the gifts of fortune he still possesses might be necessary for happiness, that he still has some of the makings of happiness. In Book III, the prisoner must confront Philosophy's claim that good fortune of any kind is not necessary for happiness. He must give up his dependence on good fortune altogether.

Marenbon's charge of inconsistency (B) and a response

Thus far, I have shown that Philosophy's medicinal approach to her consolation reconciles the apparent inconsistencies in Philosophy's account of fortune and happiness in Books II and III. Before concluding this chapter, however, I would like to consider an additional objection to my argument that Philosophy's account of happiness is consistent. Marenbon claims that Philosophy's monolithic account of happiness is inconsistent, not only with the arguments about fortune which precede it, but also with the discussion of evil in Book IV.

In the first half of Book IV, Philosophy provides the prisoner with a three-part solution to the Problem of Evil: she shows, through a variety of arguments, that evil people do not exist, that they are therefore powerless, and that they always receive their just reward.[63] The prisoner assents to this solution to the Problem of Evil but argues that even if evil *people* have no real power, bad fortune does:

> At this point I said: Now I see what is the happiness, and what is the desolation, that has been established for the actual merits of the righteous and the unrighteous. But as I weigh things, there *is* some good and evil to be found in the very Fortune of popular opinion. After all, there is not a single wise man who would prefer to be an exile, to have no resources and no good name rather than to remain unchanged in his own city and to thrive as one predominant in his wealth and resources, preeminent in his political honor, and strong in his power. For the proper functioning of wisdom is carried out with greater renown and to better acclaim in this way, when the true happiness of those who govern spills over somehow or other into the people who are at their borders, and especially when. . .the punishments of the legal process are reserved for the destructive citizens. . . .[64]

The prisoner's statement of his problem at first appears to be a defiant repetition of the question he has

[63] I discuss the individual components of this solution at length in Chapters 4 and 5.
[64] Boethius, *Consolation,* IV.5.1-3.

already put Philosophy in Books II and III.[65] It appears that, despite Philosophy's eloquent arguments to the contrary, the prisoner still refuses to believe that fortune is neither necessary nor sufficient for happiness, and Philosophy's response to his complaint fails to resolve the issue.

Philosophy argues that "absolutely every fortune is good" because it has been divinely designed to train or correct.[66] Those who suffer "bad" fortune may serve as an inspiration or a warning to others, while the fact that both evil and good people are sometimes allotted "good" fortune is a reminder that this sort of happiness is false and fickle.[67] According to Marenbon, this account of fortune (and of the reward of virtue) is at odds with Philosophy's claim that the good person is independent of fortune:

> [In Philosophy's earlier discussion,] ordinary conceptions of happiness were of no account whatsoever: by being good. . .a person is happy and no explanation at all needs to be given as to why he is, for instance, imprisoned or being tortured because these circumstances are quite irrelevant to his happiness. Now, however, Philosophy, by accepting that some explanation is needed for why a good person is subjected, for instance, to exile or execution, seems to accept that there is some value in the goods that are usually regarded as bringing happiness, and some loss of happiness inflicted by what are normally regarded as evils, although the value of moral goodness is of a higher order altogether.[68]

Once again, Marenbon's argument is that Philosophy's account of fortune (this time the one provided in IV.5-7) is inconsistent with the monolithic account of happiness established in the second half of Book III.

However, the difference between Philosophy's two treatments of fortune can be explained as a distinction between ways we might value fortune in relation to happiness. One way of thinking about the relationship between fortune and happiness is in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions (this is the story Philosophy tells the prisoner in Book III). But another way to think of fortune's relationship to happiness is in terms of instrumental value: we might argue that fortune, although neither a necessary

[65] Marenbon, *Boethius*, 118 (cf., Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness," 188); Magee, "The Good," 199 (cf., Magee, "Roman Liberty," 357).
[66] Boethius, *Consolation,* IV.6.2.
[67] Ibid., IV.6.43-49.
[68] Marenbon, *Boethius*, 120.

nor sufficient condition of happiness, is a *means* to happiness. This is precisely what Philosophy claims in Book IV:

> Since every fortune, be it delightful or calamitous, is handed down sometimes for the sake of rewarding or training the good, sometimes for the sake of punishing or correcting the unrighteous, then every fortune is good, since we have agreed that it is either just or advantageous.[69]

The fortune-based events in our lives, insofar as they are the instruments of divine justice or true happiness, are always valuable.

Philosophy provides two arguments for this claim. (1) She says that we cannot always distinguish good people from evil people and that even if we were able to tell good people from bad people, we don't always know what kind of fortune will be useful for an individual person. This means that sometimes we will be mistaken about the kind of fortune a person deserves or needs. (2) Philosophy lists a series of cases in which good or bad people are dealt good or bad fortune and shows how, in each case, the fortune dealt is actually good. She says that a good person might be the recipient of good fortune because (a) her belief in the truth might falter were she exposed to adversity, (b) because she is almost as perfect as God and therefore ought to have the perfections of a human being as well, or (c) because she will be able to use her good fortune to "beat back" unrighteousness; on the other hand, a good person might also be the recipient of bad fortune so that (a) the "virtue of her mind" will be strengthened, or (b) so she might provide an example of how evil people cannot overcome good. Philosophy provides a similar analysis of the fortune of evil people, again arguing that good and bad fortune improve evil people, make an example of them for others, or demonstrate the insecurity of a fortune-born happiness.[70]

This account of fortune emphasizes a different aspect of fortune's relationship to happiness than does Philosophy's earlier account of fortune, but it does not contradict her previous claims. The

[69] Boethius, *Consolation,* IV.7.3.
[70] Ibid., IV.6.23-49.

kind of fortune a person receives will depend on her virtue, and it will always be given as a means of promoting happiness in that person or in the people around her; however, a person can be truly happy regardless of whether she has been dealt "good" or "bad" fortune. The very fact that what we call good and bad fortune befall the good (i.e., the happy) *and* the evil (i.e., the unhappy) should remind us that a specific kind of fortune is neither necessary nor sufficient for happiness.

A consistent account of true happiness

Philosophy does indeed provide the prisoner with a consistent account of true happiness. Contra Marenbon, she does not claim that fortune is both necessary and *not* necessary for happiness. Instead, the arguments in Books II, III, and IV constitute a single account of monolithic (fortune-independent) happiness. The discussion of the inadequacy of the gifts of fortune for true happiness in Book II provides a negative characterization of true happiness, while the second half of Book III provides a positive definition of true happiness as God, the Good, and the One. What Marenbon interprets as a complex account of true happiness in Book III is actually a component of Philosophy's medicinal approach. Philosophy must convince the prisoner that the gifts of fortune are not worth mourning before she can demonstrate how it is that he can be perfectly happy without them. Finally, the account of fortune in Book IV is consistent with the account of fortune in Books II and IIII. It suggests that all fortune has instrumental value, but not that good fortune is necessary or sufficient for true happiness.

3. True Happiness and False Goods

The how-to of true happiness

Philosophy's negative and positive definitions of true happiness work together to provide a single definition of happiness as the monolithic Good. But as Marenbon points out, it is difficult to see how Philosophy can really claim to have made the prisoner truly happy if she just provides him with a definition of true happiness.[71] It seems unlikely that simply telling the prisoner what true happiness is will be enough to restore his equanimity—this would be about as effective as promising a cook that you will share your favorite cake recipe with him and then describing the cake without ever explaining how to bake it. If Philosophy is serious about consoling the prisoner, then she must go beyond showing him *what* true happiness is; she must also show him how to get it.

The beginning of Book III introduces the first component of what I shall call the "how-to" of happiness. Like the arguments in Book II, sections 1-8 of Book III advance a negative account of happiness. However, instead of providing a negative *definition* of true happiness, as the arguments in Book II do, III.1-8 forms the basis of a negative *how-to*. Where Book II demonstrates what happiness is not, III.1-8 explains how not to get happiness. As is the case with the negative definition of happiness, the negative how-to highlights the essential elements of the positive how-to.

The negative how-to

My reading of III.1-8 is directly opposed to the traditional interpretation of the section, which holds that it does not fulfill any important literary or philosophical function in the *Consolation* because it is primarily repetition. The main proponent of this interpretation is Henry Chadwick, who comments that

[71] Cf., Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness," 185.

> The first prose section of book iii announces Boethius' readiness for stronger medicines, bitter to taste, sweet once swallowed. But the shift is not explicit until the poem *O qui perpetua* (iii m. 9) which is both the literary climax of the *Consolationi* and a major turning point in its argument. The first sections of the third book recapitulate Stoic arguments of the type predominant in the second book.[72]

It is easy to see how such an interpretation might be grounded. Although Philosophy has shifted from discussing the gifts of fortune to talking about "false goods," the things she lists as false goods (riches, honor, power, glory, and physical pleasure)[73] are nearly identical to those that comprised her previous list of the gifts of fortune (riches, honor, power, and glory). Further, the arguments that she uses to prove that the false goods are not necessary for true happiness are similar to the ones she has already used in Book II.[74] False goods, like the gifts of fortune, are transient, corrupt, and external. Thus, III.1-8 contributes no new material to Philosophy's argument. The most that can be said of it is that it is the *inexplicit* beginning of a new philosophical approach, in which the "Stoic conventions" of Book II are exchanged for "the sketching of a Platonic metaphysics."[75]

Despite evidence of repetition, however, both Marenbon[76] and Magee[77] note that the first half of Book III introduces a shift in focus or a new philosophical perspective. III.1-8 is characterized by series of semantic and philosophical changes in which Philosophy begins to move away from her fortune-centric consolation. At the semantic level, Book II's gifts of fortune become false goods (beginning in

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[72] Henry Chadwick, *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford UP, 1981), 232.
[73] Boethius, *Consolation,* III.2.12.
[74] Cf., Chadwick, *Boethius,* 232-233; Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness," 181.
[75] Cf., Magee, "The Good," 188-189 (Magee's view, however, is more nuanced than Chadwick's; see note 77 below).
[76] Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness," 181: "[W]hereas the previous discussion had been concerned just to show that the gifts of fortune were not goods to be sought, Philosophy is now concerned to use her new distinction between true goods and corresponding false ones: she shows case by case how people do in fact mistakenly try to fulfill their natural desire for true goods by seeking the corresponding false ones."
[77] Magee, "The Good," 183: "[T]he function of the repetition [in III.1-8] is to occasion a more rigorous treatment of the same set of problems. Like a physician who builds up dosages against a persistent illness as the patient gathers strength, Philosophia brings stronger arguments to previously considered problems as "Boethius" proves ready for them."

III.2.5), while the term "fortune," so prevalent in Book II, almost entirely disappears.[78] At the philosophical level, Philosophy turns from an analysis of fortune qua fortune to a discussion of why people consistently miss out on true happiness. Employing her new distinction between true and false goods, she provides the prisoner with two arguments for why most people aren't truly happy.

The first argument strongly resembles the one Philosophy advances in Book II, but in addition to arguing that the gifts of fortune are not sufficient for true happiness, Philosophy also argues that human beings mistakenly believe the false goods are necessary for true happiness:

> As I have said, all mortals try to secure this state by different routes, for the desire for the true good has been naturally planted in the minds of human beings, but miscalculation drags them off the path and towards false goods. Now some of these people think that the highest good is to want for nothing, and they work hard to have riches in abundance; but others reckon as the good whatever is most worthy of esteem, and they strive to secure political honors and so be preeminent among their fellow citizens. There are those who place the highest good in the highest position of power; such people either wish to be kings themselves or try to stick by the side of those who are kings. And those who decide that renown is best hurry to prolong their glorious names by the arts of war or peace. But most people gauge the fruits of a good thing by joy and delight, and these think it the happiest thing of all to dissipate themselves in physical pleasure. There are even those who switch the causes and goals of these pursuits reciprocally: for example, those who desire wealth for reasons of power or physical pleasures, or those who try to gain power for the sake of money or of promulgating their names.[79]

People desire false goods because they think they cannot have the highest good(s) without them. They pursue "riches, positions of honor, kingdoms, glory, and physical pleasures" because they think that those things are necessary for "self-sufficiency, preeminence, power, acclamation, and delight."[80] Philosophy says that this conception of happiness as composed of true goods is partially correct and reflects human beings' inherent desire for the Good, but she hastens to add that the false goods, despite human assumptions and hopes, are not constitutive of those true goods. When the prisoner

[78] In Book II, Philosophy references "fortune" or "fortune-born happiness" approximately 39 times. In III.1-8, "fortune" (in any form) is only mentioned twice. The number of references to "happiness," on the other hand, remains nearly identical in both Book II and III.1-8: 28 references in Book II, 26 in III.1-8.

[79] Boethius, *Consolation,* III.2.5-8.

[80] "[I]t is for this reason that they long for riches, positions of honor, kingdoms, glory, and physical pleasures, because they believe that self-sufficiency, preeminence, power, acclamation, and delight will come to them by these means." (III.2.19)

later suggests that true happiness might be obtained if the *true* goods were sought after all at once, Philosophy agrees that the sum of the true goods is indeed the source of true happiness; however, one "will not find it," she says, "in those things that we have shown to be incapable of bestowing what they promise."[81]

Philosophy's second argument is that human beings fail to obtain true happiness because they have mischaracterized it. People think that happiness is composed of differentiated parts when, in fact, true happiness is composed of a unified whole: "What is simple and indivisible in its own nature, human miscalculation divides and drags away from the true and the perfect to the false and the imperfect."[82] More precisely, human beings treat self-sufficiency, preeminence, power, acclamation, and delight (the "true goods") as separate ends, when, as Philosophy demonstrates, they are actually one and the same substance: "To be sure, the names self-sufficiency, power, renown, preeminence, and delight are different, but their substance is not different in any way."[83] People who seek happiness via this mistaken division of happiness will never be able to secure it or the individual true goods of which they presume it is composed.[84]

Taken together, these two arguments provide a reasonably clear account of why it is that people consistently botch their individual pursuits of happiness. The problem, Philosophy argues, is that we have misunderstood the nature of, and the relationship among, the true goods. But the arguments do not just provide an account of the "why" behind our misguided attempts at happiness, they can also be taken as concrete directives in the art of happiness. They explain how *not* to be truly happy.

The deployment of the negative how-to is an explanatory move that we encounter in practical as well as philosophical contexts. We frequently preface our instructions for how to do *x* with comments about how *not* to do *x*. This is especially common in contexts where the goal is not just to get something

[81] Boethius, *Consolation,* III.9.22.
[82] Ibid., III.9.4.
[83] Ibid., III.9.15.
[84] Ibid., III.9.16.

done, but to teach someone else how to do it. For example, when my brother learned how to play baseball, my dad told him *not* to throw the bat behind him after he hit the ball; when I learned how to whip cream, I was told *not* to beat the cream for too long; and when my sister started taking piano lessons, her instructor told her *not* to play with flat hands. In each of these examples, a directive is issued, not just to keep someone from carrying out a specific activity (throwing a bat, overbeating cream, or playing piano with flat hands), but because that specific activity is at odds with the goal of the primary activity (playing a safe game of baseball, whipping up a bowl of cream, or playing the piano well). Part of learning how to skillfully execute the primary activity is learning which activities will hinder the execution of it; that is, learning how not to do it.

Philosophy, as the prisoner's instructor in the art of happiness, uses the negative how-to just like my dad used it to teach my brother how to play baseball. Like my dad, she realizes that part of her task (if she wants to be an effective teacher) is to describe how not to get x. She must gently make the prisoner cognizant of the error of his ways, showing him what he is doing wrong in his pursuit of happiness. Thus, the prisoner learns that if he and his fellow seekers of felicity really desire true happiness, then they should *not* follow the lead of the people Philosophy has just described. If they want true happiness, then they ought not believe that false goods are necessary or sufficient conditions of true happiness, nor ought they believe that true happiness is divisible into separate true goods.

The positive how-to

In addition to blocking dead-end paths to happiness, Philosophy's negative how-to opens doors to another, more effective approach to happiness, this one based on rationality. The definition of true happiness that Philosophy provides the prisoner in III.9 appears to be completely beyond human reach. If true happiness is, as Philosophy claims, the same as the One, the Good, and God (i.e., if it is immaterial), then it seems highly improbable that earthly goods—to which human beings have the most

and easiest access—will be of any use in achieving it. The prisoner, one might think, has every reason to give up hope of ever being truly happy.

Fortunately, the detachment and rationality that Philosophy has been advocating throughout the *Consolation* turn out to be just what he needs. Marenbon comments,

> Unsatisfactory though Philosophy's characterization of true happiness might be, she seems to think that it is something attainable by the process of reasoning through which she has led Boethius. Once the nature of true happiness is grasped, it is there to be enjoyed.[85]

Philosophy's purely rational conception of happiness as the One, the Good, and God can only be obtained via purely rational means. The prisoner no longer needs to worry about crafting his happiness out of fortune, which is often disappointingly inconstant; he has been shown a much more dependable route to his goal: the workings of his own mind.

Philosophy's two explanations for why people miss out on true happiness corroborate her claim that happiness is rationality. In the first explanation, the things that Philosophy terms "false goods" are all material and/or temporal. Wealth, honor, kingdoms, glory, and physical pleasure may be able to offer temporary benefits, but those benefits never last; they are vulnerable to the ravages of time and thieves. This explanation drives the wedge between the world and happiness—already introduced in Book II—even deeper. The connection between happiness and the material things which the prisoner used to take for granted has been rendered wholly implausible; he will have to look elsewhere for the necessary and sufficient condition for happiness, to something that is not tainted by transience or earthliness. And what the prisoner needs is exactly what the positive account of the how-to has to offer: rationality—a happiness which consists of careful thought and argumentation that can be exercised independently of fortune and false goods.

Philosophy's second explanation makes the connection between the negative and positive how-to's even more clearly. Philosophy's claim in the first half of Book III is that people mischaracterize true

[85] Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness," 185.

happiness. They have been assuming that happiness is divisible into parts, when in fact it is quintessentially "One;" this assumption has led them to pursue as individual ends what can only be obtained as a comprehensive whole. Part of the prisoner's consolation will be to restore to him an accurate characterization of true happiness, a task that falls conveniently within the scope of the rationality Philosophy has been promoting.

The medicinal role of the negative how-to

In the introduction to this chapter, I gave a brief account of why the how-to is important to Philosophy's overall consolatory goal. But though it is readily apparent that Philosophy owes the prisoner an account of how he can get the happiness she has promised him, it is less clear that she owes him a *negative* account of the means to that happiness. Why doesn't she skip over the details of the failed human attempts at happiness and go straight for the methods that are guaranteed success? The answer to this question lies in Philosophy's medicinal consolation.

Philosophy has committed herself to a gradated approach to the consolation. She has promised the prisoner gentle medicine before bitter and warned him that words of comfort will be followed by harsher claims and challenges. One of the tensions in III.1-8 is that the arguments presented cannot be easily categorized as either "strong" or "gentle" medicine. The presence of repetition suggests that III.1-8 has more in common with the gentle remedies of Book II; on the other hand, the shift in focus referenced by both Marenbon and Magee hints that the sections might be better characterized as stronger medicine. As it turns out, neither characterization is entirely wrong. The negative how-to plays a modulatory role in Philosophy's consolation, blending gentle medicine with stronger, allowing Philosophy to complete her negative account of happiness while still moving forward into the final and strongest stage of the consolation.

There is a sense in which Marenbon is correct to identify III.1-8 as part and parcel of Book II's

gentle medicine:[86] both sections of text lay the negative groundwork for the positive component of Philosophy's consolation. Book II is concerned with working out a negative definition of true happiness, III.1-8 with developing a negative account of the how-to. In the first section, Philosophy weans the prisoner from his reliance on the gifts of fortune; in the second, she provides him with reasons for why he should abandon his current approach to happiness. Neither section forms the capstone to Philosophy's consolation—the positive account of true happiness in which Philosophy presents her own definition of happiness and her method of pursuing it. Thus, the reason that Book II and III.1-8 employ similar arguments and discuss similar topics is just that both sections perform similar functions in the overarching medicinal approach. There is no dramatic change in topic because Philosophy has nothing dramatically different to advance. III.1-8 and II are important (and separate) legs of a longer journey; but they are not the ultimate destination.

However, the lack of a dramatic difference does not mean that III.1-8 does not represent a significant advancement in Philosophy's consolation. III.1-8 may not be the consummation of Philosophy's medicinal approach (i.e. "strong medicine"), but neither is it "gentle medicine" of the sort provided in Book II. To begin with, the relationship between the *what* and the *how-to* is a hierarchical one. It only makes sense to talk about *how to* make or obtain something, if one knows *what* it is that one is supposed make or obtain. To return to the examples deployed earlier: it makes no sense for my dad to warn my brother not to throw the bat behind him after he hits the baseball unless my brother knows the point is to play a safe game of baseball. Thus, Philosophy's shift in focus from the negative *what* to the negative *how-to* marks a logical, if subtle, progression in the discussion. This progression is supported by the structure of Philosophy's arguments, which, as previously discussed, evidence tighter logic and a developing philosophical perspective.[87]

Additionally, the claims Philosophy makes in III.1-8 are emotionally harsher than the ones she

[86] Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness," 180.
[87] Cf., Magee, "The Good," 183-184.

advances in Book II. Previously, Philosophy attempted to comfort the prisoner by explaining to him why the things he has lost are insufficient for happiness. By III.1-8, Philosophy does not seek to comfort, she seeks to convict. The gifts of fortune/false goods are not just insufficient for happiness; they are also not necessary for it. And the prisoner, if he continues to believe that those things are necessary for happiness, will never be happy.

These observations about the "stronger" elements of III.1-8 are corroborated by the section's stated purpose. Readers know, from the opening lines of Book III, that Philosophy plans to administer a stronger dosage of philosophical medicine. The prisoner begins Prose 1 by proclaiming his readiness for the next stage: "[T]hose remedies that you said were more bitter-tasting—" he says, "I'm not only not afraid of them, but I demand them passionately, eager to hear more."[88] And Philosophy assents to the prisoner's request, explaining "the nature of the remedies that remain: When tasted, they certainly bite; but when taken deep inside, they turn sweet."[89] Good intentions do not guarantee the successful completion of a project, of course, but given the evidence cited above, it seems reasonable to grant the prisoner and Philosophy their claim that III.1-8 constitutes a stronger (though not necessarily the strongest) medicine.

The results of the negative how-to

The interpretation of III.1-8 as the negative how-to of happiness is advantageous for several reasons. First, it gives purpose to a section of the *Consolation* whose function has thus far eluded commentators. III.1-8 is not a barren stretch of repetition in the midst of a lively conversation; nor is it an extension of Book III which fails to make good on Philosophy's promise of harsher remedies; rather, the section comprises a development in Philosophy's account of true happiness that has grown out of Philosophy's negative definition of happiness and which will grow into her positive account of true

[88] Boethius, *Consolation,* III.1.2.
[89] Ibid., III.1.3-4.

happiness. Second, my reading of the section demonstrates that Philosophy, as the prisoner's self-styled instructor in the art of happiness, is just as interested in teaching the prisoner how to be happy as she is in teaching him what happiness is. Finally, the idea that III.1-8 plays a unique role in the progression of Philosophy's account of true happiness provides further evidence that Philosophy's arguments about true happiness are consistent. Philosophy's account of true happiness as the monolithic good is not in competition with a more fortune-friendly account (as I showed in the previous chapter); nor is that account the *ad hoc* summation of a series of loosely-connected arguments; instead, Philosophy's account of true happiness is comprised of distinct building blocks which provide a detailed explanation of what does, and doesn't, count as true happiness and of what will, and won't, lead to it.

4. A Literary Interlude

The prisoner's "interruptions"

Like the preceding books of the *Consolation*, Books IV and V contain intricate philosophical arguments, but what makes the latter two books unique is that they both begin with an interruption and digression. No longer the passive, "dumbfounded" prisoner of books I-III,[90] the prisoner of Books IV and V refuses to allow Philosophy to direct the conversation, demanding instead that they pursue topics of his own choosing. In Book IV, the prisoner interrupts Philosophy with his question about the problem of evil "just as she [is] getting reading to say something else,"[91] and in Book V, the prisoner introduces the Problem of Providence despite the fact that Philosophy is "starting to turn the direction of her pleading toward the treatment and explanation of some other things."[92]

For Relihan, the prisoner's refusal to hear Philosophy out and his insistence that they pursue his topics of choice demonstrate that the prisoner has taken control of the dialogue and suggest that he rejects Philosophy's consolation.[93] Now the prisoner is certainly capable of rejecting Philosophy's consolation; he might, for a variety of (perhaps justifiable) reasons, be dissatisfied with Philosophy's account of happiness and decide, in the end, to refuse it. But notice that if the prisoner does in fact reject Philosophy's account of happiness, two important things happen: first, Philosophy fails to accomplish her consolatory goal (since she will not have made the prisoner truly happy according to her definition of happiness); second, the prisoner, in rejecting Philosophy, shows that he no longer trusts Philosophy. If Philosophy can't make good on her promises, and if the prisoner himself doesn't trust her, then what reason does her audience have to trust her? Why should we think she is a reliable guide to the truth if the prisoner finds her arguments so unconvincing that he is compelled to reject them?

[90] Boethius, *Consolation,* I.1.13 and I.2.5.
[91] Ibid., IV.1.1.
[92] Ibid., V.1.1.
[93] Relihan, *The Prisoner's Philosophy,* 21 and 14.

Philosophy's failure to convince the prisoner may lead us to abandon the *Consolation* wholesale, but the discrepancy between Philosophy and the prisoner's points of view may also lead us, like Relihan, to posit an ironic *Consolation* in which the prisoner purposefully rejects Philosophy.[94]

I do not think that Philosophy ever loses control of the dialogue, at least in the sense Relihan intends; rather, she *concedes* control. The prisoner's interruptions, and the succeeding philosophical "digressions" of Books IV and V, prove that Philosophy has fulfilled her consolatory goal. In Book I, the prisoner was not able to fully articulate, much less answer, his questions about evil and free will. But once Philosophy helps him reclaim his essential rationality, the prisoner is able to pose much more sophisticated versions of his initial questions; he is able to facilitate robust philosophical discourse because now he is truly happy.

The proof of rationality

I argued in Chapter 1 that Philosophy's overarching goal in the *Consolation* is to make the prisoner truly happy. This goal is exemplified in Book I by her implicit commitment to restoring the prisoner to rationality (the necessary and sufficient condition for true happiness), and by her explicit sub-goals of explaining to him who he is, what the final cause of the world is, and how the word is governed. If Philosophy is to meet her consolatory goal, she must fulfill both her explicit and her implicit commitments: she must make the prisoner rational and answer the questions she has set herself.

By the end of Book III, Philosophy has resolved the explicit problems she identified in Book I as the source of the prisoner's illness.[95] Through her account of happiness, she has provided the prisoner with accounts of the world's final cause and of how the world is governed. These accounts, together with the philosophical process in which Philosophy engages the prisoner, have helped him to

[94] Ibid., 13.
[95] Marenbon, *Boethius*, 102; contra Relihan, *The Prisoner's Philosophy,* 15, where it is argued that the promised discussion of the prisoner's true identity is never explicitly provided. My reasons for siding with Marenbon follow.

understand himself as a rational human being.

What we have not seen, up to this point, is evidence that the prisoner himself has become become rational. It is worth pausing here to ask what a proof of rationality would look like. I submit that, in the prisoner's case, such proof would be found in his behavior; that is, the prisoner, if he is rational, will behave rationally rather than irrationally. The prisoner's behavior is an important component of a proof of rationality because rationality is active as well as passive. If rationality were strictly passive, then the prisoner would only need to hear someone else reason well in order to be truly happy, and if this were the case, Philosophy's consolation would have been over in Book III. But such passive rationality is clearly not what we mean when we say that someone is rational. When we call some rational, we mean that they think and behave rationally (and not just that they listen to what other rational people have to say). Thus, proof of the prisoner's rationality will consist in his contributing to (and not just listening to) rational discourse, where "contribution" includes, but is not limited to, the philosophical articulation of questions, arguments, and objections, and the ability to direct, as well as participate in, a philosophical discussion.

In Book I, as well as in Books II and III, the prisoner is characterized by his silence in the face of Philosophy[96] and by his inability to articulate his problems in general or universal terms, rather than as merely local issues. The prisoner's lengthy exposition of his woes in Meter 1 and Prose 4 of Book I is presented as a complaint in which he charges Philosophy and her God with double-dealing: they promised him that happiness would result from virtue;[97] instead, his goodness has reaped only bad fortune. The problems of evil, providence, and prescience, which he and Philosophy will pursue in Books IV and V, are hinted at throughout this diatribe, but the prisoner regards them as personal (subjective), rather than philosophical (objective), problems.

[96] See n.90 above.
[97] Boethius, *Consolation,* I.4.5-7.

Attempts at philosophical discourse in Book I

The prisoner attempts to set forth the Problem of Evil mid-way through his monologue in Book I:

> [W]hat utterly amazes me is that [sacrilegious men] have accomplished the things that they hoped for. For we may grant that a desire for what is inferior comes from common human failing, but that the designs that the lawless entertain are powerful against innocence while God is watching over it—this is like some monstrosity.[98]

This summary of the prisoner's concern is promisingly objective: the prisoner here considers sacrilegious men in general and wonders why God, who is presumably good, continues to allow bad people to harm the innocent. The prisoner's attempt at philosophy, however, collapses into localized complaint almost immediately. Regardless of the way the universe works, he wants to know why he, in particular, has been made the victim of injustice: "But you see what was the outcome that awaited my innocence: In place of reward for true virtue I have incurred punishment for a trumped up charge."[99] Similarly, when the prisoner broaches the subject of liberty, he does not, in traditional philosophical fashion, contrast the liberty of the human will with the threats posed to it by fate, providence, or divine prescience; instead he focuses only on his personal, physical freedom (or lack thereof).[100] In fact, the prisoner makes the claim that if his physical and political liberties have been denied him, then he has no liberty whatsoever: "For what liberty is left that can be hoped for now?"[101]

Throughout the prisoner's monologue, Philosophy remains unmoved, and she clearly regards the prisoner's personal complaints as counter-productive.[102] In Prose 5, at the end of her summary of the prisoner's complaints, Philosophy says:

> But ultimately it was your lamentation against Fortune that glowed white-hot; you complained, in the last lines of your delirious Muse, that rewards are not paid out that are equal to merits, and you made a wish that the peace that rules the heavens rules the earth as well. But since a full-scale rebellion of the passions has besieged you; since depression, anger, and sorrow drag you off in different directions—in your present state

[98] Ibid., I.4.29-30.
[99] Ibid., I.4.34-35.
[100] Cf., Magee, "Roman Liberty," 348-349.
[101] Boethius, *Consolation,* I.4.26-27.
[102] Ibid., I.5.2.

> of mind, the more caustic remedies are not yet appropriate. So let me use the gentler ones for a time, so that what has grown into a hard tumor from the inrush of confusing emotions may, by my gentle caress, become more yielding to and susceptible of the strength of a more bitter-tasting medicine.[103]

The complaints Philosophy cites are closely related to the philosophical problems of evil and free will: the complaint that his punishment was undeserved and the complaint that the events unfolding on earth are ruled by the whims of fortune rather than "the peace that rules the heavens." But though she acknowledges the prisoner's interest in these problems, Philosophy refuses to address them. She argues that as long as the prisoner is "besieged" by this "full-scale rebellion of the passions," he will be unable to withstand "the more caustic remedies."

I take it (and I have argued in Chapters 2 and 3) that the more caustic remedies are comprised by the philosophically rigorous account of true happiness, an account which will restore the prisoner to rationality by showing him the answers to Philosophy's questions and by showing him how to articulate and answer his original questions. Thus, Philosophy's claim here is that the prisoner, in his present state, cannot engage his questions. Before he can do this, he must relearn how to think rationally, a process which Philosophy aims to facilitate via a philosophical dialogue about three, essential questions.

Philosophical maturation

For most of Books II and III, the prisoner's role in the dialogue is passive. He listens and accepts Philosophy's arguments, and when he does speak, it is merely to agree with his instructor,[104] or, at most, to feebly remind her of the ills he has suffered.[105] Book IV, however, marks a turning point in the dialogue. Philosophy, the prisoner says,

> had sung these words softly and sweetly, never losing the dignity of her appearance or

[103] Ibid., I.5.10-12.
[104] Ibid., II.4.1; III.1.1-2, 6. Prose sections 3 and 9 of Book III also contain passages that aptly characterize Boethius's role at this stage of the dialogue: the dialogue alternates between Philosophy's presentation of a premise or conclusion, and Boethius's verbal acceptance of that premise or conclusion.
[105] Ibid., II.3.2; II.4.2; II.4.10; II.7.1.

> the impressiveness of her speech, but I had not yet forgotten the sorrow that was planted within me, and so I interrupted her train of thought then, just as she was getting ready to say something else.[106]

Philosophy has finished her exposition of true happiness and is preparing to turn to a new subject, but before she can start, the prisoner stops her. Philosophy is still "dignified," just as she is in Book I, her speech remains "impressive," and Boethius is quick to acknowledge that her words are "obviously divine" and "irrefragable."[107] But, despite his respect for Philosophy, the prisoner is no longer cowed by her; he has recovered his voice.

Armed with a renewed confidence in his own mind and a solid understanding of the nature of the Good, God, and the One, the prisoner returns to the issues that confounded him as a Roman citizen in the first book, and recasts them as objective philosophical problems:[108]

> But here is what is perhaps the greatest cause of my sorrow: the fact that evil things can exist at all, or that they can pass unpunished, when the helmsman of all things is good. Make no mistake: Only you can ponder this with the amazement that it deserves. No, there is another, an even greater thing connected to it: I mean, when gross wickedness thrives and has dominion, that not only does virtue go without its true rewards, but it is even forced to grovel at the feet of lawless men and to be ground beneath their heels, subjected to punishments as if for crimes committed. That such things happen in the kingdom of a God who knows all things, who is capable of all things, but who desires good things and the good alone—no one can be amazed at it, and no one can complain about it, as it deserves.[109]

In Chapter 5, I break this passage down into what I called "three variations" on the Problem of Evil and discussed Philosophy's solutions to them. The fact that the passage can be subdivided in this way suggests (to me at least) philosophical maturation on the prisoner's part. But there are several other important differences between this presentation of the Problem of Evil and its presentation in Book I. First, the prisoner no longer evokes his own (subjective) misery as an example of the contradiction he is

[106] Ibid., IV.1.1.
[107] Ibid., IV.1.2.
[108] I use the word "renewed" because the prisoner admits that "though I had recently forgotten them in my depression because of the wrongs done to me, you [Philosophy] have spoken things that were not completely unknown to me before" (IV.1.2).
[109] Ibid., IV.1.3-5.

trying to articulate. Instead, he turns to Philosophy's (objective) account of God's character and contrasts that with general observations about the nature of the world: Philosophy has proven that God is essentially good, but, the prisoner argues, we all know that there is evil in the world. Second, the prisoner phrases his concern as an argument ("If we know x about God, then y ought to follow), rather than as a complaint ("Why did x have to happen to *me*?"). Third, Boethius no longer accuses God and Philosophy of misleading him—an accusation which casts doubt on the usefulness of philosophy as a whole. Instead, the prisoner recognizes that it is *only* through philosophy that one will be capable of probing the depth of the dilemmas he faces. "Only you," he says, "can ponder this with the amazement that it deserves."

One might argue at this point that the dilemmas the prisoner highlights are Philosophy's fault. After all, she is the one who has defined God as the Good, and it is precisely this definition which leads to the three variations on the Problem of Evil. If the prisoner hadn't listened to Philosophy, then he would never have run into philosophical difficulties of this caliber. It is worth noting, however, that the basic problems the prisoner poses in Book IV are the same as those in Book I (he is worried about evil in both cases). What has changed is the scope of the problems: by Book IV, the prisoner is worried about *all* evil and *all* good people, not just the evil directed toward one good person (himself). Additionally, the stakes are higher in Book IV than they are in Book I: the prisoner now understands that it is not just his own virtue and life that is affected by the Problem of Evil, but the very definition of God as wholly Good.

A successful consolation

At the beginning of this chapter, I pointed out that whether or not the prisoner rejects Philosophy's consolation has important repercussions for an interpretation of the *Consolation*. I also argued that we can make sense of the prisoner's apparent rejection of Philosophy by considering it in terms of the prisoner's philosophical development. Philosophy's ability to meet her consolatory goals is

contingent, in part, upon proof of the prisoner's rationality. He can be said to have been made happy only if he is able to fully participate in philosophical discussion, i.e., if he is able to articulate problems as philosophical, rather than personal, problems, and if he is able to direct, as well as follow, a philosophical conversation.

The arguments above demonstrate that by Book IV the prisoner has recovered enough to (re)direct the conversation and philosophically articulate his initial questions; he knows that rationality is necessary and sufficient for true happiness, and he is capable of exercising that rationality in philosophical discourse. The prisoner's "interruptions" and "digression" are not proof that he rejects Philosophy's consolation, but that he embraces it. Philosophy has accomplished her consolatory goal, and, in consequence, her audience has no reason to mistrust her. There is no hint of literary irony in the *Consolation*.

5. A Philosophical "Digression"

Old questions, new attitudes, conflicted solutions

Let us grant, then, that the prisoner's increased control of the dialogue should not lead us to suspect Philosophy's authority. The topics of Books IV and V have not been selected by Philosophy, but this doesn't mean she has failed to make the prisoner rational/happy. The prisoner, restored to rationality, is anxious to return to the questions that initially troubled him and settle them philosophically. Like an eager and dutiful student, he wants to make good use of the new perspective Philosophy has given him. More problematic than the prisoner's attitude toward Philosophy are the results of his questioning. Relihan and Marenbon argue that Philosophy, faced with the prisoner's account of unjust punishment and the rampant evils with which the earth is filled, offers only a series of invalid and contrived arguments in defense of her theory of the universe; and in the end, even her brilliant defense of free will is undermined by her inability to reconcile the problems of Providence and Prescience.[110]

Philosophy's inability to resolve the prisoner's problems has serious implications for my reading of the *Consolation.* Philosophy has promised the prisoner that rationality, and rationality alone, is the cure for what ails him. But if Philosophy—the ultimate symbol of rationality—cannot answer the prisoner's questions, then we, like Marenbon and Relihan, have reason to question the success of Philosophy's consolation. Perhaps the *Consolation* is intended to be ironic after all. Perhaps the point is not that rationality is the ultimate solution to the prisoner's problems but that there are limits to how far philosophy can take us.[111]

This is not what I argue in this chapter. In this chapter, I argue that we ought not give up on Philosophy, because Philosophy, as it turns out, has not failed us. Although she may have intended to

[110] Relihan, *The Prisoner's Philosophy,* 21; cf., Marenbon, *Boethius*, 144-145.
[111] Marenbon, *Boethius*, 162-163.

take Boethius in another direction before his interruptions, Philosophy's solutions to the problems of evil, providence/prescience, and free will are valid, and they are consistent with her account of happiness as rationality.

Variations on the Problem of Evil

At the beginning of Book IV, the prisoner outlines three problems that he believes can be derived from the conjunction of his own experience and Philosophy's claims about the nature of God:

(A) According to Philosophy, God is and desires only good; additionally, God is omniscient and omnipotent. But as Boethius has had ample opportunity to discover, evil things exist and go unpunished. God cannot will the existence of evil (because he desires only good); however, if evil exists contrary to God's will, then God is not omnipotent.

(B) God desires only good and he is omnipotent. If God desires only good, and if he is omnipotent, then he will want good people to triumph over (or be more powerful than) evil people, and he will arrange things such that good people are more powerful than evil people. However, evil people are frequently more powerful than good ones. Therefore, God does not desire only good or he is not omnipotent.

(C) God desires only good and he is omnipotent. If God desires only good, and if he is omnipotent, then he will want virtue (the goodness of people or good people) to be rewarded. However, the existence and power of evil people prevents good people from receiving their just reward. Therefore, God is either not omnipotent or he doesn't desire good.

Each of these problems can be described more generally as a variation on the problem of evil: How can a good God allow or condone evil?

Philosophy begins her solution to this tripartite problem with the prisoner's second version of the Problem of Evil (B): "Therefore," she says, "you will first be permitted to realize that power is always

the possession of good people, and that evil people are always deserted by every one of their strengths. . ."[112] Philosophy makes a series of arguments for this conclusion, but the primary one, and the one whose validity is questionable, is the argument I sketch below:

(1) Nothing can be created or accomplished without both will (or desire) and power. [Premise (IV.2.5)]

(2) Power is the ability to obtain what one desires. [Premise: meaning of power]

(3) All people, both good and evil, desire true happiness (which is the Good). [Premise (IV.2.10-12), the conclusion of arguments in Book III]

(4) People become good by obtaining the Good. [Premise (IV.2.13)]

(5) Good people are powerful. [2, 3, 4 (IV.2.15)]

(6) If evil people obtained what they desired, they could not be evil. [4 (IV.2.14)]

(7) Evil people do not obtain what they desire. [6]

(8) Evil people are not powerful. [2, 7 (IV.2.15)]

This is an argument that Boethius was previously unable to comprehend because he lacked premise (3), knowledge of the final cause. Now that he knows that all people desire the Good, but that only some of them (the good people) obtain it, he is able to understand why evil people are not truly powerful.[113] Thus, it looks as if Philosophy is able to consistently employ her previous account of the monolithic Good in her first answer to the problem of evil.

However, Marenbon claims the argument's validity is compromised by premise (4). Premise (4) makes a claim about the relationship between moral goodness and the Good: once people obtain the Good, they will themselves be good. This claim appears to derive from Philosophy's previous argument that once people obtain the Good, they will be truly happy because true happiness and the Good are identical. Based on this, one might argue that if people who obtain the Good *are* truly happy, then they

[112] Boethius, *Consolation,* IV.2.2.
[113] Cf., Marenbon, *Boethius*, 115, 120.

are also the Good (or they somehow participate in the Good). However, there is a key difference between Philosophy's Book III argument about the Good and her claim in premise (4): in the first case, Philosophy is talking about goodness qua the Good; in the second case, her claim is about *moral* goodness. And thus far, Philosophy has given us no reason to believe that the Good and moral goodness are identical.[114]

Marenbon's concern would be relevant if we were approaching the text from a Kantian perspective, in which moral considerations are sharply distinguished from (and prioritized above) non-moral ones. But this approach is anachronistic. Boethius has been steeped in ancient Greek and Roman philosophical and literary traditions, traditions in which morality was not prioritized above other values.[115] For Boethius, good and evil are not contingent upon a person's specific moral actions, but upon the kind of human being one is. In the *Consolation,* good and evil people are thus distinguished from one another by their virtues and vices rather than by which actions they have or have not committed: the prisoner asks Philosophy to prove that the virtues of good people are always rewarded while the vices of evil people do not go unpunished.[116] Thus, we have little reason to think either that the prisoner expects Philosophy to hold forth on the relationship between *morality* (as we think of it) and the Good or that Philosophy is obliged to cater to such a request.

In fairness, Marenbon is not the only scholar to approach the *Consolation* this way. Magee also explains that Books II-IV are designed

> to draw out the moral implication of the conclusions reached by the end of Book 3, more precisely, to explain how evil can exist in a world that is universally governed by the Good. . . . Book 4 emerges as a necessary continuation [of Book 3] by applying the metaphysics of the Good to moral considerations that have troubled 'Boethius' from the start.[117]

[114] Marenbon, *Boethius*, 115.
[115] Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy,* rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 5.
[116] Boethius, *Consolation,* IV.1.7.
[117] Magee, "The Good," 184.

Magee's claim that Book IV is a "necessary continuation" of Book 3 supports the interpretation of the *Consolation* I have advanced so far. But his analysis of the nature of that continuation, like Marenbon's, is heavily influenced by our modern Kantian intuitions. Magee's description of the Problem of Evil in moral terms doesn't take into account the fact that the evil men to whom Boethius refers have earned the title because of their failure to flourish as human beings (see arguments below), not because of their failure to adhere to a moral code.

Philosophy's account of rationality and happiness has provided the prisoner with an explanation of what it means to be a "good" human being:

> [I]f it is agreed that the possession of anything is more valuable than the thing to which is belongs, then you in your own valuation place yourselves beneath them when you determine that these most worthless objects are your possessions. This happens deservedly, for this is the condition of human nature: only then does it surpass all other things, when it knows itself; but that same nature is degraded, brought lower than the dumb animals, if it ceases to know itself. It is merely a part of their nature that other animate creatures are unaware of themselves, but for human beings this is morally reprehensible.[118]

Philosophy is here concerned with the essence of human nature, i.e., the quality or virtue that makes a human beings "surpass all other things." The person who is truly human, according to Philosophy, is the person who knows herself, who recognizes that her happiness is independent of the gifts of fortune. This same person, I take it, is "good"—not because she is doing the right *moral* thing and refraining, e.g., from murder or theft, but because, insofar as she knows who she is, she is engaged in the activity that makes her human.

This non-moral account of human goodness becomes the basis for Philosophy's solution to the first variation on the Problem of Evil (A). Philosophy submits three reasons that evil people might fail to obtain the Good: (1) they don't know what it is; (2) they know what it is but allow themselves to be distracted by "lust"; or (3) "they desert the Good knowingly and willingly, and cast themselves off

[118] Boethius, *Consolation,* II.5.28-30.

towards the vices."[119] Philosophy's point in this section is that, whichever way one looks at it, evil people are powerless. But she also makes the surprising claim that if evil people knowingly desert the good, they also stop existing: "But in this way they not only cease to be powerful, but cease even to exist at all; after all, those who abandon the common goal of all the things that are also quit existing as well."[120]

This claim is counter-intuitive, but Philosophy has the resources she needs to defend it. I submit that the most charitable reading of Philosophy's claim (and it is admittedly hard to be charitable) hinges on her definition of the word "exist" and her conception of the human being. Philosophy says that she "[does] not reject the statement that evil men are evil men; but [she does] deny that they exist in a pure and simple sense."[121] In the next prose section, she will remind the prisoner that "[he has] learned just a little while ago that everything which exists exists as one thing, and the One itself is the Good; the logical consequence of this is that everything that exists seems in fact to be good."[122] For Philosophy, then, existence "in a pure and simple sense" is the monolithic Good.

Understood in this way, existence is not, as we might at first think, contingent on being human. Although Philosophy thinks that desire for the Good characterizes human beings, she has not committed herself to the claim that this desire for the Good is what makes human beings exist. Existence, she seems to think, is contingent, not on *desire* for the Good, but on its actual acquisition: in order to exist, one must have obtained the Good. It turns out that all good people desire, and have obtained, the Good; therefore, all good people exist (in "a pure and simple sense"). Evil people, on the other hand, are characterized by their failure to obtain the Good, so they don't exist (in "a pure and simple sense").

Philosophy's account of rationality, happiness, and the monolithic Good also provides a solution to the prisoner's final variation on the Problem of Evil (C). In IV.3-4, Philosophy argues that the nature of the Good ensures that virtue is rewarded and evil does not go unpunished. The good person's reward is

[119] Ibid., IV.2.30-32.
[120] Ibid., IV.2.32.
[121] Ibid., IV.2.34-35.
[122] Ibid., IV.3.14.

the Good itself, because happiness is the Good itself and the Good is the final cause.[123] Likewise, the relationship among rationality, happiness, and the Good ensures that evil people are always appropriately punished, regardless of how things appear to us (i.e., regardless of whether or not they possess material goods). If evil people possess material goods, it is not a reward but a self-inflicted punishment, insofar as reliance on material goods will only further erode their humanity and, consequently, make them more unhappy.[124] If, on the other hand, evil people are stripped of their power and wealth, they are undergoing a rehabilitative punishment that will wean them from false goods and allow them to once more participate in the Good and true happiness.[125]

This third solution is dissatisfying to modern ears, but it is consistent with Philosophy's previous claims about the Good, and the individual claims of the argument are likewise consistent with one another.[126] Additionally, the arguments Philosophy presents in these sections derive their premises from the conclusions she reaches about true happiness in Book III. While this kind of coherency is not necessary for the consistency or validity of the arguments, it nevertheless demonstrates the kind of thematic coherency that is important to a literary analysis of the *Consolation*, suggesting that the text is not a hodgepodge of literary motifs and philosophical points of view, but a unified whole.

The problems of providence, prescience, and free will

Philosophy's solution to the third variation on the Problem of Evil effectively replaces the uncertainty of fortune with the certainty of divine Providence. Once this solution is coupled with her arguments from Books II and III, there is no longer any place for fickleness in the scheme of things, whether we are considering the nature of happiness or the reward and punishment of good and evil

[123] Ibid., IV.3.3-4.
[124] Ibid., IV.4.25; IV.4.33-37.
[125] Ibid., IV.4.13-21; cf., my analysis of Philosophy's account of reward and punishment and its relationship to happiness at the end of Chapter 2.
[126] The literature is also silent regarding any logical fallacies in this argument.

people.[127] The conception of the universe as essentially ordered, however, gives rise to a new problem, which Marenbon calls the "Problem of Providence:"[128] If each person's lot in life is determined by Providence, then how can human beings have free will? As the prisoner puts it, "[I]n this sequence of causes, so attached to one another—is there any freedom of our independent judgment? Or does the chain of fate tie together the very motions of human minds as well?"[129]

Philosophy's response, like her responses to the Problem of Evil, is drawn from her previous account of human nature. Throughout the *Consolation*, Philosophy has argued that human beings are rational. Now she adds that every rational being, because it is rational, has the ability to discriminate among possible courses of action: "it distinguishes between things that it must avoid and things that it must choose on its own."[130] Moreover, once a rational being has made a decision about what to do (or avoid), it seeks to do (or avoid) that thing. Thus, all human beings, because they are rational, have the ability to make choices about what they want (to desire one thing rather than another): "For this reason, within the beings that have reason present within them, a freedom to want and not want is present as well."[131] For Philosophy, independence of judgment cannot be explained in terms of fate or a causal chain because it is entirely different from the other events that characterize our lives. As Marenbon explains,

> If I rationally willed to do or not to do *x,* the correct explanation for this act of volition is not that it resulted from a certain set of causes, but that I willed it so, because I discerned that *x* is desirable or undesirable in itself. Acts of will, then, are in principle unlike every other sort of act and event.[132]

However, while Philosophy thinks that all human beings have free will, she doesn't think they are all equally free. She argues that "ethereal substances" have a greater freedom of judgment than

[127] Cf., Magee, "Roman Liberty," 359.
[128] Marenbon, *Boethius*, 121.
[129] Boethius, *Consolation,* V.2.2.
[130] Ibid., V.2.4.
[131] Ibid., V.2.6.
[132] Marenbon, *Boethius*, 123.

physical substances. As a result, human beings are most free when they "preserve themselves intact within the contemplation of the divine mind;" if they allow themselves to be swayed by passions and choose vice instead of virtue—i.e., if they "fall away from" reason—they impair their free will.[133]

This argument is consistent with Philosophy's previous arguments about the nature of human beings. If human beings are rational and their rationality consists in their participation in the Good, it makes sense that if human beings cease participating in the Good, they will lose a commensurate amount of rationality and, hence, free will. However, anxious to solidify her main point, which is that all things are divinely ordered, Philosophy concludes her argument by claiming that all individual choices fall beneath the gaze of divine Prescience, "a gaze that from eternity looks out at all things in advance" and "assigns to their merits each and every thing that has been predestined for them.[134] This claim instantly gives rise to a new problem (what the prisoner calls "a still more difficult doubt"[135]): If God foresees everything, then, in keeping with his perfection and infallibility, everything God foresees must happen; and if everything that is foreseen must happen, there cannot be any freedom of judgment.[136]

The prisoner is anxious to resolve this problem for two reasons. First, he points out that if there is no free will, then "rewards and punishments are set before good and evil people in vain—no free and voluntary motion of their minds has deserved them."[137] If Philosophy has no solution to the Problem of Prescience, then her defense of the justice of God's providence is destroyed. Second, the prisoner is concerned that the loss of free will negates "[t]hat one and only avenue of exchange between human beings and God:" prayer.[138] This second concern is surprising because, up to this point, the prisoner hasn't mentioned prayer, and Philosophy hasn't included it in her discussion of the necessary and sufficient conditions for obtaining happiness (God, the Good, and the One). But the prisoner thinks that

[133] Boethius, *Consolation,* V.2.8.
[134] Ibid., V.2.11.
[135] Ibid., V.3.1.
[136] Ibid., V.3.3-6.
[137] Ibid., V.3.28.
[138] Ibid., V.3.34.

prayer is the only way human beings can communicate with God "before they succeed in attaining it," and because prayer provides this connection with God, he is anxious to preserve it.[139] It is important to notice that Philosophy and the prisoner don't discuss whether prayer is necessary for "attaining" God, and neither one suggests that it is. Thus, while the introduction of prayer here is surprising, it is not inconsistent with Philosophy's previous account of God.

Philosophy's solution to the Problem of Prescience can be divided into three parts.[140] In the first part, Philosophy argues that there are four different kinds of knowledge ("modes of cognition") and that each kind has a distinct object: the object of sense perception is material particulars; the object of imagination is shape; the object of reason is the universal; and the object of understanding is the One.[141] These modes of cognition are hierarchically ordered so that sense perception (the lowest mode) cannot know shapes, universals, or the One, but understanding (the highest mode) can know material particulars, shapes, and universals.[142] The consequence of the Modes of Cognition principle is that beings can know things in different ways. Human beings are endowed with sense perception, imagination, and reason, but they do not have understanding; thus, they do not "see" the world in the way that God (who has understanding) does.[143]

In the second part of her argument (Prose 6), Philosophy argues that in order to understand God's perspective of the world, we have to understand divine nature. Returning to her claims about the nature of God, the Good, and the One, Philosophy reminds the prisoner that God is eternal, and since a being's nature determines the kind of knowledge it has, she concludes that God's knowledge is not confined by time: "[S]ince God has an ever-eternal and ever-present-moment condition, his knowledge

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[139] Ibid., V.3.34.
[140] I am indebted for the summary that follows to Marenbon's and Sharples' analyses of Philosophy's solution to the Problem of Prescience (Marenbon, *Boethius*, 130-145; Robert Sharples, "Fate, prescience, and free will" in *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius,* edited by John Marenbon (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009): 207-227).
[141] Boethius, *Consolation,* V.4.26-30; cf., Marenbon, *Boethius,* 135.
[142] Boethius, *Consolation,* V.4.31-36.
[143] Ibid., V.5.8-12.

as well has passed beyond all motion of time and is stable in the simplicity of its own present. . ."[144] God's prescience is thus not a knowledge of things to come but a knowledge of what already is.

This claim leads Philosophy to the third and final part of her argument, where she makes a distinction between two kinds of necessity: simple and conditional. Philosophy lists as a simple necessity "the fact that all human beings are mortal," while a conditional necessity is described as the fact that "it is necessary that a man is walking if you know that he *is* walking."[145] God's knowledge of the eternal present involves both simple and conditional necessity, but his knowledge of human judgment involves only conditional necessity. The fact that he knows what human beings will decide does not mean that they have to make a particular decision (simple necessity), but that since they *are* making a particular decision, and since God knows what that decision is from the perspective of the present, they must *be making* a particular decision (conditional necessity).[146]

The three components of Philosophy's argument can be summarized thusly: (1) Different beings have different kinds of knowledge; (2) God's knowledge is atemporal; and (3) God's present knowledge of human judgment imposes only conditional necessity on free will. Thus, human beings are free to choose otherwise, and God knows every decision we will make because he sees us as we make it. This argument explains how human beings have free judgment despite God's prescience, it supports Philosophy's previous account of the justice of divine reward and punishment, and it preserves prayer as a valuable means of communion with God. But it fails to address a problem the prisoner raised at the beginning of the discussion.

In Prose 3, the prisoner worried that even if we prove that human free will is compatible with divine prescience, we won't have proved that Philosophy's account of God's nature is compatible with human free will. If the fact that we are walking along the road is not determined by God's prescience; if,

[144] Ibid., V.6.15-17.
[145] Ibid., V.6.27-28.
[146] Ibid., V.6.33-43; cf., Marenbon, *Boethius*, 143.

in fact, God knows we are walking along the road *because* we are walking along the road; then isn't God's knowledge in some way dependent on human judgment? And isn't this contrary to Philosophy's account of the self-sustaining nature of God?

At the end of Prose 6, Philosophy responds to the prisoner's concern that even conditional necessity makes God dependent on human judgment, saying,

> It is not from the coming to pass of future events but rather from his own proper simplicity that God has been allotted this present grasping and seeing of all things. And from this also comes an answer to the problem you posed just a little while ago, that it is an unworthy thing that our future actions be said to provide a cause for the foreknowledge of God. For such is the force of this knowledge, embracing all things by its present-moment knowledge, that it has itself established the status of all things, while it owes nothing to things that are subsequent to it.[147]

Philosophy's main point is that God's knowledge does not depend on our individual choices. But her (admittedly vague) claim that God's knowledge "establishes the status of all things" raises a serious problem: Does Philosophy mean here that God's knowledge *determines* all things, and therefore "owes nothing to things that are subsequent to it?"[148] If she does, then, as Marenbon points out, she is flatly contradicting her previous claim that God's knowledge does *not* determine human actions. But perhaps Philosophy intends her claim to be read more subtly. One alternative reading of this passage, suggested by Sharples, is that Philosophy claims only that God's prescience does not depend on *future* actions, since he dwells in an eternal present.[149] However, this interpretation only explains why human actions don't determine God's knowledge; it ignores the most contentious element of Philosophy's claim, which is that God's knowledge necessitates human actions.

A better interpretation of this passage reads it as a claim about the relationship between the human and divine capacities for knowledge, instead of a claim about the relationship between individual human decisions and divine knowledge. Human beings are able to make judgments because they are

[147] Boethius, *Consolation,* V.6.41-43.
[148] Marenbon, *Boethius*, 144-145.
[149] Sharples, "Fate, prescience and free will," 221.

essentially rational. And since human beings' rationality results from their participation in the Good (or God), they owe their ability to make judgments to God. Thus, God establishes the status of all things because the judgment-making capacity of all things is derived from his existence. Conversely, the individual choices made by human beings are undetermined; however, the fact that human beings have the capacity to make individual choices is determined by God's existence (i.e., if God didn't exist, then neither would rational, choice-making human beings).

This reading of Philosophy's final comment about divine prescience is corroborated by her conclusion to the *Consolation*. Philosophy clearly does not think that her defense of God's independence has compromised her claims about human free will. On the contrary, her conclusion reiterates her main arguments in Books IV and V: good and evil people are justly reward and punished; this is consistent with "an inviolate freedom of independent judgment;" and this freedom of judgment, in turn, is consistent with the unchanging, independent nature of God.[150] If there is any necessity at all, Philosophy concludes, it is to be found only in the "necessity of righteousness," the mandate that our participation in the Good—our rationality—lays upon us to be virtuous.[151]

A new consolatory narrative

The questions the prisoner poses Philosophy in the last book of the *Consolation* are difficult, but Philosophy successfully navigates them. Her accounts of evil, providence, and prescience are consistent with each other and with her overarching account of human and divine nature, and through them she justifies divine reward and punishment, proves human free will, and preserves the efficacy of prayer. Thus, if the *Consolation* is ironic, it is not because Philosophy fails to answer the prisoner's questions—but neither is it because the prisoner rejects Philosophy's consolation (see Chapter 4) or because Philosophy's account of happiness as rationality is inconsistent (see Chapters 1-3). The literary and

[150] Boethius, *Consolation,* V.6.44-48.
[151] Ibid., V.6.48.

philosophical inconsistencies that were supposed to provide evidence for an ironic *Consolation* have been dissolved.

What we are left with is a *Consolation* that is philosophically valid and literarily coherent. Philosophy's goal is to make the prisoner happy, and she does so. She provides him with a definition of happiness, tells him how to get it, and walks him through the process of obtaining it. Her dialectical proof of rationality as happiness begins by persuading the prisoner that the gifts of fortune are not sufficient for happiness; it then shows him why good fortune/false goods are not necessary for happiness; and it concludes with a picture of a monolithic happiness which the prisoner is, at that point, able to comprehend and accept. The prisoner, restored to rationality and eager to test its power, reintroduces his initial questions about free will and evil. But this second interrogation is different from the first for two reasons: (1) the prisoner is now able to pose his questions as philosophical rather than personal problems, and (2) Philosophy answers them.

Postscript:
Consolation and Satisfaction

The conclusion of the *Consolation* is triumphant. Restored to his rightful rationality, the prisoner no longer has a reason to be downcast in the face of bad fortune. He understands the nature of God, the nature of the world, and his place in the scheme of things, and though his body may still be imprisoned, his mind is entirely free. Philosophy has navigated him though a series of increasingly complex problems, and her consistent and valid solutions to those problems have demonstrated that the prisoner's rationality will not fail him unless he fails it.

However, to say that the *Consolation* is triumphant, and to say that it is not ironic, is not necessarily to say that it is satisfying. The *Consolation* is satisfying in at least one sense of course: it is satisfying for the prisoner—otherwise the prisoner would not have yielded to the cure and, therefore, would not be truly happy. But though Philosophy may have made the prisoner truly happy (in her sense of the word), the rest of us may remain unhappily unconvinced. Philosophy's definition of happiness as rationality is too austere for modern taste, and her neoplatonic bundling of rationality and happiness with God, the Good, and the One is equally unappealing.

The great advantage of Relihan's and Marenbon's interpretations of the *Consolation* is that they attempt readings that satisfy modern readers of the text. They explain how the *Consolation* can be a great literary and philosophical work, despite the distastefulness of some of its ideas; the flavor of irony lends postmodern credence to a text that might otherwise come across as woefully outmoded. However, the unfortunate consequence of this approach is that it discourages us from interacting with the ideas Boethius presents. An ironic interpretation of the *Consolation* gives us license to read the text without ever stopping to reflect on its arguments.

My reading of the *Consolation* doesn't allow the reader to sidestep the claims at the heart of the *Consolation*. I argue that Boethius' *Consolation* is a genuine attempt to answer questions that have

puzzled human beings for millennia; further, it is an attempt that turns out to be successful, insofar as the answers provided are consistent; thus, if we think Philosophy's definition of happiness is a bad one, or that her solutions to the problems discussed are flawed, then we had better be prepared to explain why. In short, my interpretation of the text leads the reader to first-order philosophy. It challenges us to reconsider the problems of fortune, human happiness, fate, evil, providence, and free will as they are presented in the *Consolation*, just as Philosophy challenges the prisoner to reconsider them at the beginning of the text, and just as Boethius intended to challenge his readers centuries ago.

After reading the *Consolation*, we may come to the conclusion that Boethius' arguments are not only dissatisfying but also unsound, or we may find that his arguments are both sound and satisfying. Regardless of the particular conclusion at which we arrive, I submit that the very process of coming to any conclusion at all offers its own variety of satisfaction. As readers of the *Consolation,* we become participants in the dialogue. We, like the prisoner, are invited to explore what is at stake in the problems discussed and what their solutions might look like. More importantly, as we question and challenge the text's claims, we develop a greater appreciation of our own capacity for reason.

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